

Our Purpose in Bible Study

Why do we take the time to study the Bible? The answer to that question is often different for different people. People will turn to the study of scripture for different reasons, some of which are not intended for the seeking out of truth. Sometimes, we may not even know why we are searching the scriptures, without a serious self examination. We have to evaluate our own motivation for studying the word of God. We will be considering many of the reasons that people study the Bible with this lesson. We also will be examining the purpose everyone should have for studying the Bible. If we aren't studying for the right reasons, then our study will not really do us any good! First, let us consider many of the reasons that people study the bible:

An Intellectual Endeavor

Some people study the scriptures only to gain intellectual knowledge. They do not have any belief in the writings found therein, and they certainly will not take its instruction to heart. It is merely another book of literature, just like any other. There are, after all, many universities that provide instruction in Bible, as taught by atheistic professors.

There are many professed Christians that approach their Bible study in a similar manner. They are not concerned about truth, or pleasing the Lord. They are concerned about knowing more than other people. They are trying to amass knowledge, just for knowledge's sake. While biblical knowledge is important, it is only important for the sake of application! When we know something, but do not see the authoritative value of it, that knowledge will not change our lives.

Study to Prove Others Wrong

Sometimes, it seems that people study the scriptures just for the pleasure of proving someone else wrong. This is closely related to studying simply for an intellectual endeavor. Some people just relish the idea of telling others how wrong they think they are. Quite often, much time is spent gathering trivia, and insignificant facts, for purpose of stumping other people, especially spiritual leaders (preachers or elders, etc.). We become so convinced we are right, that we go to the scriptures only to show that others are not right.

Study to Prove the Bible Wrong

There are some who go to the Bible in order to try and prove it wrong. They will spend hours upon hours in study to try to find anything that they can criticize, to show that it is not correct. They believe that if they can find any kind of discrepancy, then they have disproved the whole of the book. While we will take a look at proposed contradictions within the scriptures later in our study, it is worth pointing out at this juncture that true contradictions could be a real problem for the integrity of the scriptures. However, those who approach scripture with this type of a motivation will never consider that they may be missing something that would correct their understanding of a proposed contradiction. If something appears to be inaccurate from a cursory examination, they use it to reject the whole of scripture. There have been many "scholars" who have spent their entire adult lives studying the Bible for the sole purpose of proving that it was not the word of God, but rather the construct of man.

Study for Selfishness

Sometimes people study just to make themselves feel more important than others around them. They seem to believe that if they can cite or quote a passage faster or more accurately than someone else, they are more correct. They become puffed up in how much knowledge that they have acquired. Paul warned the Philippian brethren that they should never function out of selfishness, but rather esteem others better than themselves (Philippians 2:1-11).

If our study of the scriptures becomes all about us, then we are approaching them for purely selfish reasons. It should not be about pride in how much we know, but rather it should be about conforming ourselves to what God wants us to be. The difference is the first is selfish, the latter is selfless.

Study to Prove What We Already Believe

Quite often, people go to the scriptures with a prejudice. They know what they already believe, and jump into a study of the scriptures to find proof for their already held belief. This can be a hard barrier to overcome. After all, if we believe something, that belief had to come from somewhere! We are convinced that our deeply held belief must have come from previous study in scripture. So, we return to the scripture with an already prejudiced mind, and look for the passages that seem to teach what we already believe. We then ignore the passages that might stand in opposition to our held belief. If this is our motivation, then we will have great difficulty in coming to the truth.

Study to Prove What We Want to Believe

Maybe we go to scripture without knowing anything about what it teaches on a particular topic, but we know what we *want* to believe on that topic. This problem happens frequently in our current society that allows what is socially acceptable to frame all morality. People establish general principles for what they want to be true, and then, because they also want to be identified as believers, they turn to scripture to try and formulate support for what they want to be true. This leads to the twisting of scriptures, often using a passage that condemns a certain practice to support that very practice! Peter warned back in the first century that there would be those who twisted the scriptures to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:14-16).

It has been said that the Bible can be used to prove anything. When we start with a belief that we are intent on defending, we can probably find some passage to twist in a way that supports our belief. If our motivation is to prove what we want to believe, then we will end up mishandling and misusing the word of God.

All of these reasons for studying the scriptures are not helpful to true understanding of the word of God. However, it is extremely difficult to check our prejudices, and keep them from interfering with true, beneficial study. That is a talent that takes a lot of work, and a lot of self evaluation. In most cases, unless we do something that would expose our poor motivation, others will not be able to see or help us correct these faults. We have a responsibility to look at our own hearts, and determine why we are studying God's word. Our motivation for studying God's word will impact the outcome of our study.

Importance of Knowledge...

Before we turn to the right motivation for studying scripture, it is crucial for us to understand that knowledge is of vital importance. Perhaps it would be easy to dismiss the need for the right knowledge because there are so many poor motivations for attaining that knowledge. However, the New Testament writers make it abundantly clear that attaining the right knowledge, for the right rea-

sons, is of great importance. In fact, Paul emphasized the need to attain knowledge in an effort to become more like Christ. This makes perfect sense! How can we become more like Christ if we do not know what He was like?

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ... (Ephesians 4:11–13).

Knowledge was so important, God provided it as one of the miraculous spiritual gifts of the first century church:

And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills (1 Corinthians 12:6–11).

Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away (1 Corinthians 13:8).

Our intent is not to minimize the importance of attaining knowledge at all! It is quite important to work diligently to attain “knowledge of the Son of God.” But, if our approach to gaining knowledge is askew, then we will never grow to be like Christ.

So then, what should our approach to studying the scriptures be? Why do we spend time studying the Bible? Let us consider just a few ideas that should frame our approach to the scriptures.

Study to Show Yourselves Approved...

First, we should return to the opening premise of our study, and the verse from which we have taken the title of this study:

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15 KJV).

As we have already discussed, the New King James, and other modern translations, use the phrase, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God...” The idea is the same. We diligently spend time with God’s revealed word so that we might present ourselves approved unto Him. We are not trying to please men, but rather we are seeking to please the Lord. Paul addressed this very problem in Galatians 1. The brethren he was writing to were intent on requiring Gentile Christians to first follow the Law of Moses. They were preaching a different gospel than what had been delivered to them by Paul. After instructing them that they needed to avoid any gospel that was different than what they had already received, Paul addressed what might be the motivation for those who would teach those different gospels:

For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ. (Galatians 1:10)

Paul refused to fall into the trap of teaching a message that was designed to appeal to men. He was determined that he would work to please the Lord, of which he was a bondservant, or slave.

God has provided all that we need to be pleasing to Him. He has not, however, said that pleasing

Him is an easy task. It will take work to please Him. It will take diligence in our handling of His word to please Him. Our goal, each and every time we approach His word, should be to learn what He would want of us!

Study to Learn Obedience...

Before we can be obedient, we must know what the will of the Lord is. Jesus Himself declared that His purpose was to fulfill the will of God:

Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work (John 4:34).

Jesus knew what the will of the Father was, and He was dedicated to being completely obedient to that will. He learned to be completely obedient to that will:

As He also says in another place: "You are a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek"; who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. (Hebrews 5:6–8)

That complete obedience is what God expects of us today as well. We need to follow the example of Christ, and come to full submission before Him. As Jesus was preparing to leave the earth after His resurrection, He gave this instruction to His disciples:

"All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18–20).

In these final instructions, Jesus told His disciples that they were to "make disciples" and then that they were to teach them "to observe all things that I have commanded you..." Jesus wanted His disciples to convey a particular attitude to all the people to whom they taught the gospel. They were to teach that true disciples would have the attitude that they would observe "all things" that were commanded by the Lord. It would take a lot of time get to everything that was taught by Jesus, as well as everything that was revealed through the Holy Spirit. Eventually, all of that would be taught. However, it did not (and does not) take much time to teach the principle that we must be submissive to everything that God has revealed! If this principle is established, then we will approach scripture in a humble, submissive, and obedient manner. When we study, we will never be rebellious against what we read. Sometimes, we study and find some instruction that God has for us, and then we work to decide if we will accept it and obey it. If we have learned the principle that Jesus was teaching here, that will never be the case. If we have truly adopted this premise, we will have already decided to be obedient to whatever teaching we find in God's will.

Study to Grow to Be More Like Christ...

Earlier, we saw how we needed knowledge to know what it meant to be like Christ. As we consider our approach to scripture, it is imperative that we understand the need to put what we learn from scripture into practice. It is not good enough to just know about Christ. We have to take what we learn, and make it a part of our lives, so that we are becoming more and more like Christ every day. Study, without practical changes will be pointless.

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be

blessed in what he does (James 1:22–25).

We should be learning more and more about the will of God every day. The more we learn, the more we should be adding to our lives. If we are not willing to make direct applications to our own lives, then all the studying in the world will never make a difference to our spiritual lives.

We should have goals that we have set in our studies. At the top of that list, we should be trying to grow to be as much like the Lord as we can be. He has been set before us as an example. We should want to be like Him, and we should do whatever is necessary to grow to be like Him. That starts with the acquisition of knowledge, and then requires the application of that knowledge. We have to know what He was like, and then we have to begin to act like Him. If we are failing to conform our lives to His example, then we are failing at our study efforts!

Study To Teach Others...

Not only do we need to be like the Lord, but as we learn more about being like Him, we need to teach others to do so as well. It is not good enough for us to be content with being faithful to Him. We have a responsibility to share the good news of the gospel so that others can enjoy His eternal spiritual blessings as well. Paul told Timothy that he had the responsibility of teaching others, who would then have the same responsibility:

And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also (2 Timothy 2:2).

This principle is at the very heart of the great commission given by Jesus to His disciples (Matthew 28:18-20, previous page). They were to “make disciples.” They taught the gospel message which would bring the hearers to obedience (“baptizing them...”). It would be natural for those who were truly disciples to go forth and share the good news of salvation with others. That is exactly what we see happening, with the gospel spreading quickly from Jerusalem after the day of Pentecost in the book of Acts. The spread of the gospel takes place today in the same manner. Those who are truly converted will study in such a way as to be able to share the things they learn with others!

There are probably more reasons that can be given for studying the scriptures, but most can be summarized under these basic concepts. It is important for us to have the right reasons for studying God’s word, so that we come to understand His mind as He would have us to do. If we accept the scriptures as they are in truth, the word of God, then we will respond to them in the way that God requires. If we refuse to honestly evaluate and apply what we read there, then we are showing that we do not accept them as truly being the word of God, no matter what we might claim!

Questions

1. List at least 3 reasons that some people study the Bible that would not be beneficial to them for spiritual growth.
2. Why do you think it is so important to some people to prove the beliefs of others wrong? Is it wrong to use scripture to show when a belief or practice is incorrect?
3. Is acquiring knowledge from scripture important? How can this acquisition become bad?
4. List at least 3 reasons that we should be diligent about studying the scriptures.
5. How do we grow to be more like Christ? How important is this responsibility?
6. If we are not fulfilling our obligations as Christians, does continual study benefit us? Why or why not?
7. Add to the lesson: What other reasons (good or bad) would you add to this lesson for studying the scriptures?