

Using The Written Word Of God Rightly

God hated their interpretations of His written Word

Zephaniah 3:4 and Ezekiel 22:26 reveal that the priests in the land of Judah at the times of the prophets Zephaniah and Ezekiel were teaching interpretations of God's Word which God hated. Zephaniah 3:4 states: "***Her prophets are insolent, treacherous people; her priests have polluted the sanctuary, they have done violence to the law.***"

Ezekiel 22:26 declares: "***Her priests have violated My law and profaned My holy things; they have not distinguished between the holy and unholy...***"

These verses show it is crucial to learn how to interpret the Bible in ways in which God approves.

How Jesus Christ interpreted God's written Word

Because Jesus Christ is *God*, He is the *perfect interpreter of the Bible*. Because He is in perfect union with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, we can see how the Father and the Holy Spirit interpret the written Word of God by observing how Christ interpreted it.

Here are Christ's principles for interpreting the written Word of God:

Jesus did not interpret verses contrary to other verses

First, note Matthew 4:5-6 reveals Jesus and Satan interpreted the Bible by different methods. These verses record Satan interpreted passages of Scripture in *isolation* from other verses and passages on the same or related topics: "***Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, 'If You are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: "He shall give His angels charge over you," and 'In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'***"

Satan implied Psalm 91:11-12 contained a promise that God the Father would allow His power to be used for showing-off purposes. Satan was able to suggest this false interpretation because he took this verse in isolation from other verses of Scripture.

But Jesus Christ showed all verses must be interpreted in agreement with the meaning of other verses of Scripture which can relate to the same topic. He did this by answering Satan's false interpretation of Psalm 91:11-12 with Deuteronomy 6:16. Matthew 4:7 records: "***Jesus said to him, 'It is written again, "You shall not tempt the Lord your God."***" By quoting Deuteronomy 6:16, Jesus taught that Psalm 91:11-12 cannot be taken to mean we can force God to use His power just for show.

If Satan can wrongly interpret verses of Scripture by taking them in isolation, so can humans. In this example, the Lord Jesus revealed He regards two of the keys to interpreting verses of Scripture correctly are:

- not taking any verse in isolation.

- making sure that one's interpretation of this verse agrees with the wording of other verses on the same topic in other parts of the Bible.

We can only find the full counsel of God's attitudes to a particular matter by studying *all* of His commands and instructions on a specific topic. If we leave out one verse on the topic, we may make great errors. Also we need to consider any exception which God makes to these commands and instructions taken together. But we have no God-given right to make our own exceptions. As we will see later, making our own exceptions is a sin similar to that practiced by the Pharisees.

If we wish to be filled with the Holy Spirit like Jesus was, we must copy His example in interpreting and applying verses of Scripture to our lives in ways which are in agreement with other verses on the same topic.

Jesus applied general commands to more specific situations

Secondly, Jesus applied God's general commands and instructions to *specific situations* which were *not previously mentioned* in the written Word of God but which can be *included* in the *broader meaning* of the general commands or instructions. Examples of these occur in Matthew 4:3-4, 4:5-7, 4:8-10, 9:9-13, 12:1-7, 15:3-9, 19:3-6, Mark 7:9-13, 10:2-9, Luke 4:3-4, 4:5-8 and 4:9-12.

In Matthew 9:9-13 and 12:1-7, Jesus applied Hosea 6:6 to two new specific situations. Hosea 6:6 is a general broad command of God: ***“For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.”*** In Matthew 9:9-13, Jesus Christ applied Hosea 6:6 to the specific situation of the Pharisees' attitudes to tax collectors and gross sinners. In Matthew 12:1-7, Christ applied Hosea 6:6 to the specific circumstance of the Pharisees' attitude to His disciples and to the Sabbath.

In Matthew 19:3-6 and Mark 10:2-9, Jesus applied Genesis 2:24 to the question of whether God approved of divorce. Genesis 2:24 is a general broad instruction of God applying in every era of history: ***“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”*** In its original wording, Genesis 2:24 mentions nothing specifically about divorce.

In Matthew 4:3-10 and Luke 4:3-12, Christ applied Deuteronomy 6:13, 6:16 and 8:3 to the specific situation of His three temptations by the Devil. This is even though in their original contexts, these three broad commands or instructions of God mentioned nothing specifically about Christ being tempted by Satan.

Deuteronomy 8:3 declares: ***“So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.”*** In this verse, Moses gave the broad instruction that ***“man shall not live by bread alone...”*** in relation to a *specific situation* in which the Israelites in Moses' time experienced. But note Jesus applied this same general instruction to His own later specific different circumstance.

In Matthew 15:3-9 and Mark 7:9-13, Jesus applied God's general commands found in Exodus 20:12, 21:17, Leviticus 20:9 and Deuteronomy 5:16 to a situation which is not specifically mentioned in the latter commands' wording.

A sign that believers are truly daily filled with the Holy Spirit is they will apply God's general commands to their more specific practical life situations and will turn from and repent of any disobedience to His specifically applied commands.

Jesus approved of God's exceptions but not human exceptions

Thirdly, He *did not* approve of any *man-made exceptions* to God's commands and instructions. The only exceptions Jesus Christ approved were those that God or Christ Himself specifically commanded. We see Jesus using these two interpretation principles in Matthew 15:3-9 and 23:16-22. In these passages, Christ attacks the Pharisees for making their own exceptions to God's commands. If we are really daily filled and ruled by the Holy Spirit, we will not make our own exceptions to God's commands.

In Matthew 12:5-8, Jesus taught that Numbers 28:9-10 was a God-approved exception to the broad Sabbath command for Israelites of Exodus 20:8-11. In John 7:21-24, Christ said the circumcision command of Leviticus 12:3 was another God-inspired exception to the Sabbath command.

Jesus disapproved of man-made rules

Fourthly, in Mark 7:1-8, Jesus Christ revealed that it is a sin to make rules or commands for believers which are:

- contrary to other Biblical verses on the same topic and/or
- not specifically commanded in the Bible for believers under the relevant covenant(s) and not specific applications of broader Scriptural commands and teachings that are relevant to the specific covenant(s) under which the believers are living.

For example, in Mark 7:1-8, Jesus rebuked many or all of the scribes and Pharisees for teaching as commands of God the man-made religious traditions that they must wash their hands in a special way before eating and that after coming from the market place they must wash. There are no specific or broad Biblical commands or teachings which support these above religious traditions.

It is possible the Pharisees had misinterpreted the symbolic expressions about clean hands in Psalm 18:20, 18:24, 24:3-4 and Job 17:9 and/or had sinfully broadened the specific command of God related to Israelite priests under the Mosaic Covenant washing their hands and feet at the laver of bronze before entering the Tabernacle (see Exodus 30:18-21), to apply to Israelites who were not priests and to washing other things besides hands and feet.

Psalm 18:20, 18:24, 24:3-4 and Job 17:9 refer to clean hands as being *symbols* of our attitudes and actions being pure and free of guilt. In Deuteronomy 21:6, the washed hands of the city's elders were symbols of their innocence. James 4:8 links the symbolic phrase "***Cleanse your hands***" to having a pure heart.

Note in Mark 7:4, Mark accused many or all the scribes and Pharisees for wrongly teaching many of their other religious traditions as commands of God. Mark records "***there are many other things which they have received and hold.***"

It is very easy to fall into the false Pharisaic method of interpreting Scripture which Jesus rebuked in Mark 7:1-8. For example, someone can wrongly interpret Peter's words in 1 Peter 3:3-4 to mean it is sinful to wear gold wedding rings, gold watches or gold earrings. But note Exodus 3:22, 28:15-21, 39:8-14 and Proverbs 25:12 reveal that God approves of believers wearing such gold ornaments. Therefore, 1 Peter 3:3-4 is instead teaching that a woman should place a higher priority on having a good heart and spirit than on her outward appearance.

Using Pharisaic interpretation principles, we can use the two historical examples of Moses and Joshua taking their shoes off in God's Presence (see Exodus 3:5 and Joshua 5:15) to say we must take our shoes off before entering a church meeting. But note Jesus Christ is God manifested in the flesh and He never commanded any believer to take off their shoes in His Presence before or after His resurrection. Also there is no verse in the Bible which commands or teaches us to take off our shoes before entering a church meeting.

Jesus interpreted various Old Testament prophecies

Fifthly, on many occasions, Jesus Christ declared that various Old Testament prophecies were being fulfilled during His time.¹

The dreadful sins of adding or subtracting from God's Word

In Deuteronomy 4:2, 12:32, Proverbs 30:5-6 and Revelation 22:18, God gives strong warnings about two serious sins. These are the sins of:

1. adding to God's written Words and commands
2. taking or subtracting from God's written Words and commands.

In Deuteronomy 4:2, God commands: ***"You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take anything from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you."***

In this verse, God emphasised that the only way we can assure we obey God's commands *exactly* as He intended is we never add any man-made laws to His commands and we never make any man-made exceptions to His commands.

In Deuteronomy 12:32, God stated: ***"Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it."*** Here God shows that the way to carefully observe what He has commanded us is to not add or take away from His commandments *in even the slightest way*.

Proverbs 30:5-6 declares that if we add man-made commands and teachings to His Word, He will one day rebuke us very strongly: ***"Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to***

¹ See Matthew 11:10, 13:14-15, 15:7-9, 21:16, 21:42, 22:43-44, 26:31, Mark 7:6-7, 12:10-11, 12:36, 14:27, Luke 4:17-21, 7:27, 20:42-43, 22:37, John 6:45 and 13:18. In Matthew 10:35, Luke 23:30 and John 15:25, Jesus interpreted three Old Testament verses as predictive prophecies. This is even though in their original context they were not presented as being this. Predictive prophecies are different in a number of ways from other types of verses. So such prophecies are harder to interpret with accuracy. Also Christ had God's inspiration to interpret these three other verses as predictive prophecies. God has not given you or I the authority to do the same with Bible verses.

those who put their trust in Him. Do not add to His words, lest He reprove you, and you be found a liar.”

Over the centuries, many Christians have sinned greatly by adding man-made commands and teachings to God’s Word. In recent years, many liberal Protestant, Evangelical, Charismatic and Pentecostal churches have sinned severely by subtracting from God’s Word by opposing some of the teachings of the Bible and/or making their own man-made exceptions to God’s commands for New Covenant believers and/or claiming that some parts of the New Testament about homosexuality, women and other issues are not God’s Word but only reflect ancient Jewish or Roman culture.

A New Testament warning

In Revelation 22:18-19, God warned: *“For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.”*

God warns that He would punish those who added or subtracted from the Book of Revelation. These verses are another confirmation of what an extremely serious sin God regards adding to or subtracting from the commands and teachings of His Word.

A popular wrong method of interpreting the Bible

There are numerous popular methods of interpreting the written Word which are contrary to the principles Jesus used. One of these false methods teaches we can only know that something is wrong in God’s eyes if it is specifically stated in the written Word to be wrong.

It is true that there are numerous things which the Bible does not condemn in specific words or does not condemn broadly as parts of general commands and teachings. Examples of these things are cars, telephones, computers, video machines and medical surgical instruments.

But we are very foolish if we imagine that this means God approves of us using telephones to lie, televisions and video machines to enjoy nude sex scenes and dirty jokes or surgical instruments to kill unborn babies. Each of these latter practices are covered by numerous Bible verses with broad applications.

Also note the Bible does not specifically say that taking cocaine and heroin, abortion, looking at nude photos in pornographic magazines or on the Internet, molesting the sexual organs of little children, masturbating a friend with your hand, passing urine or faeces in public, allowing handicapped babies to starve to death, gambling \$50,000 on the horse races, lying on your income tax return, claiming Unemployment Benefits from the Federal Government while having a full-time job and hundreds of similar things are wrong.

But note by using Jesus’ method of interpretation in applying God’s general commands against destroying God’s Temple – our bodies (see 1 Corinthians 3:16-17), murder, looking at the exposed nakedness of those whom God does not approve us looking at, greed, lying and stealing, we know all these things are certainly against God’s will.

God has deliberately made many of His commands and teachings *broad* or *general* enough to be able to cover many specific circumstances which are not mentioned in the written

Word of God. For example, even though in Rome, gladiators murdered each other and some parents threw their unwanted babies in the Tiber River, God did not lead Paul to condemn these evil acts in specific wording in the Book of Romans. But God did guide Paul to condemn murder in general terms in Romans 1:29 and 13:9. These two verses cover gladiator fights and throwing babies in a river to drown, without specifically mentioning these.

Church leaders must preach and teach God's whole counsel

In Acts 20:26-27, the Apostle Paul told the leaders of the Church of Ephesus: ***“Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.”***

Here Paul stated that he was innocent of the blood of all those he had preached to because he had declared to them the whole counsel of God's Word. Paul had not left out any part of God's Word which human listeners did not like to hear. He did not preach a watered-down compromising people-pleasing version of the “gospel”.

When Paul said ***“I am innocent of the blood of all...”***, he was referring back to God's Words to the prophet Ezekiel in Ezekiel 3:16-21 and 33:1-9. Ezekiel 3:16-21 records: ***“Now it came to pass at the end of seven days that the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore hear a word from My mouth, and give them warning from Me: When I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die’, and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life, that same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand. Yet, if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul. Again, when a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die; because you did not give him warning, he shall die in his sin, and his righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered; but his blood I will require at your hand. Nevertheless if you warn the righteous man that the righteous should not sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live because he took warning; also you will have delivered your soul.”***

Bible Study Questions

1. What should our attitude be to the written Word of God?
2. What are the God-approved principles Jesus Christ used in interpreting the Scriptures?
3. Can we know that something is a sin because the matter is covered by a broad Biblical command or teaching? This is even though the latter does not specifically name the thing, for example, gladiator fights and abortion.

If we wish to know God intimately and recognise His voice, we must use His written Word rightly. In John 6:63, Jesus Christ emphasised how important is God's Word: ***"It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life."*** Christ here says the Holy Spirit imparts life to us and God's Word is *spirit* and *life*. The Word of God is not dead or lifeless. Our false interpretations and false theological theories about the Word of God are dead and lifeless, but true interpretations of the Word are not.

The Word of God is *living* and *active* in its *original God-intended meanings*. This is why you can have a preacher who is not born again, mention certain true aspects of the Gospel from the written Word of God and have unsaved listeners turn in saving faith to the Lord Jesus Christ through the workings of the Holy Spirit. The Word is living and saving even though the preacher is spiritually lifeless.

In Matthew 4:4, Christ said that God's Word is more important to us than even food: ***"But He answered and said, 'It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."'"***

Christians should not worship the cover, paper and ink of the Bible. But they should have *awe* or *reverence* for the Words of God recorded in the Bible. Ezra 9:4, 10:3, Isaiah 66:2 and 5 refer to *trembling* in relation to the Word of God. Isaiah 66:2 records the Lord said: ***"...But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word."*** Harris, Archer and Waltke say the word ***"tremble"*** in the above four listed verses means "awe or reverence" in relation to the Word of God.² We reverence His Word because He has spoken it.

Psalm 119:161-162 refers to standing in awe of God's Word and His Word being a *great treasure*: ***"...but my heart stands in awe of Your word. I rejoice at Your word as one who finds great treasure."***

Loving God's Word

In Psalm 119:119 and 167, the God-inspired writer said he *loved* the testimonies of God's Word. In Psalm 119:47, 48 and 127, God led the Psalm-writer to declare he *loved* God's commandments. In 119:159, the writer says he *loved* the precepts of God's Word. ***"Precepts"*** here refers to "the responsibilities that God places on His people".³ Those who say we are committing the sin of Bible-worship if we love God's Word, are wrong.

It is sinful to treat the Bible as a lucky charm. Also, we should not bow down and worship the Bible. But we should love the Word of God which is recorded in the Bible. Psalm 119:132 refers to loving God's Name. It is not a sin to love either God's Name or His Word.

In John 17:17, Jesus said that God's Word is *absolutely true*: ***"...Your Word is truth."*** Psalm 33:4 reveals God's Word is *absolutely right*. Matthew 24:35 declares: ***"Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away."***

In John 14:23, Jesus said that if we love Him, we will obey His Word. In 1 Timothy 4:6, Paul refers to Timothy carefully following good Biblical teaching. Psalm 119:9-11 reveals one of the keys to victory in our walk with God is knowing and obeying His Word and its

² Harris, Archer and Waltke, page 322.

³ Ibid, page 732.

commandments: *“How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word. With my whole heart I have sought You; oh, let me not wander from Your commandments! Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.”*