

## **"Get It Firsthand"** **2 Timothy 3:10-17**

### **INTRODUCTION**

I'd like to begin by asking you two questions. Question #1 - are we living in the end times, that is, in the last years or at least decades before Jesus comes again? How many of you believe that we are? How many of you believe that we may or may not be? Question #2 - why do you believe what you believe about that? Is it because someone taught it to you? Or is it because you concluded it from your own study of Scripture? Or, to ask it another way, did you get your belief secondhand or firsthand?

Turn to the passage I read, 2 Timothy 3:10-17, and that's what I'm going to preach about today - getting what we believe firsthand.

### **SCRIPTURE**

Let's start with verses 15 and 16, and the terms "*sacred writings*" and "*Scripture*." Those terms refer to the 39 books of the Old Testament. The equivalent for us of course is all 66 books of the Bible.

Now notice what Paul says about Scripture in verse 15. It is "*able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation*." It tells us what we need to know, in other words, to have abundant life now and eternal life forever. You've often heard me say it this way. Scripture gives us the best information about the most important matters in human life.

Because it does, it's "*profitable*," verse 16 says. It is so in four ways. It teaches, reproves, corrects, and trains us in righteousness. All of us need all four of those things, which means that we need Scripture. It is profitable to us all. But it isn't automatically so.

I read about a devout Christian whose husband had married her as a cover for his homosexuality. He consummated the marriage so it couldn't be annulled and then wouldn't have anything to do with her. One the contrary, he'd bring his male friends home and have sex with them right in front of her. Malachi 2:16 says, "*For I hate divorce,*" *says the Lord, the God of Israel.*" That woman took that verse to mean that

divorce is always wrong and so wouldn't divorce her husband. She just died a slow lingering emotional death instead.

I could tell you a dozen stories just like that, of Christians believing, to their great detriment, that Scripture means something that it doesn't mean. Those stores teach us this. Scripture understood is profitable. It greatly enhances our life. But misunderstood, it is often harmful. It can greatly diminish our life.

Our calling then is clear. Understand Scripture! There are two ways to do that, both of which I want to discuss with you.

## **GETTING IT SECONDHAND**

The first way is to get it secondhand. That means that we rely on someone else or more likely several someone else's to tell us what it is saying. We call these someone else's our masters or teachers.

That is a valid and even necessary way of learning Scripture. That's how Timothy in fact learned much of it. Look at the phrase in verse 14, *"knowing from whom you have learned them."* Timothy had three teachers who taught him much of what He knew about it – his grandmother and mother, according to 1:5, and Paul, according to 3:10. It's clear that he had learned Scripture from others and so should we.

There are two reasons for that. First, a teacher is able to teach us in a matter of hours what it took him or her years of study to learn. Second, a teacher is often able to teach us things that we can't learn on our own. So, learn from teachers.

But make sure that they're good ones. We should choose the best teachers from whom we can learn Scripture. There are two things that we should look for in that regard. The first is competence. They should be intelligent insightful people who have a grasp of Scripture and human existence. The second is character. They should be humble people who have a deep and familiar friendship with Jesus.

Let's go back to verse 14 again and the phrase, *"knowing from whom you have learned them."* Timothy needed to know from whom he

had learned Scripture and so do we. We should ask and answer two questions. First, who are the ones from whom we have learned what we believe about it? And second, do they have competence and character?

## **FALSE TEACHERS**

There's a reason that we should do that. It's so that we won't be deceived and led astray. Look at verse 13 in that regard. Paul talks here about imposters who deceive. We know from his letters that false teachers were one of the first century church's biggest problems. They taught falsehoods that many Christians, to their detriment, believed.

Sadly, it's the same way today only worse. I say "worse" because of mass communication. In the first century, the false teachers had to actually come to the Christian's church. But that's no longer the case. Teachers of all kinds come right into people's homes and cars through television, radio, and books 24 hours a day. And they're listening to what they say. Typical Christians have several television preachers and/or authors that they faithfully follow, besides all the others they listen to and read here and there. The problem is that many of those teachers are deceiving them. They're teaching them false things.

One of American's most popular television pastors, for instance, preaches what is called a favor minded gospel. It's the idea that if we think He will, God will give us favor with people. They'll bend the rules for us. They'll go the extra mile for us – treat us differently, better, than they do others. If we're favor minded, our children will get the best teachers, those who wait on us will give us the best service, those in authority will do things for us that they aren't supposed to do and so on. I've heard and read him say that. But how do we reconcile such preaching with verses 11 and 12 here. Paul says, ***"Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."***

That illustrates the dominant and most damaging error of false teachers today. They have taken Scripture and dressed it up in middle

class American clothing. They've westernized it in other words. And because Christians like that, they listen to and believe it – but to their detriment. No one is going to go deep with Jesus and get the abundant life He has to offer if they listen to and follow these false teachers.

I challenge all of you today to do two things. First, identify who your teachers are. Who are the ones that you most frequently listen to or read? Second, determine their competence and character. Do they have a grasp of Scripture and human existence and if so, are they humble friends of Jesus. If they aren't, on either count, don't follow them.

## **GETTING IT FIRSHAND**

There's a second way to understand Scripture. The first is to get what we believe from it secondhand. But the second and better way is to get it firsthand. That means that we get it from our own study of Scripture itself. Getting what we believe firsthand requires two things.

First, we must interpret Scripture correctly. We don't determine what the verse or passage "means to me." We determine what the verse or passage actually means. We figure out what the writer intended to say to the people to whom he wrote it.

Second, we must apply Scripture correctly. We determine what the true implication of the verse or passage is to us now. We figure out if and how what the writer intended to say is relevant to us now.

I once talked with a Christian who quit playing cards for fun with his family. When I asked him why, he referred to 1 Corinthians 8 and what is called the stumbling block principle. Paul says that we should not do something that causes our brother to stumble. That Christian then said that playing cards with his family deeply offended several Christians he knew. So, he quit playing them.

The issue is clear. What did Paul mean when he said that we shouldn't do something if it causes our brother to stumble. To determine that, we go to 1 Corinthians 8 itself and do two things.

First, we correctly interpret what Paul said in the chapter. We figure out what he intended to say to the Corinthian Christians. It was that they shouldn't eat food offered to idols. It wasn't because doing so was wrong but because it was a stumbling block to converts from paganism. It was causing some of them to revert back to idol worship.

The second thing that we do is correctly apply what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 8. We figure out what its implication is to us now. It's this. If doing something would substantially damage a Christian's spiritual life, we shouldn't do it even if it isn't wrong.

Going straight to 1 Corinthians 8 itself shows us something. That Christian wrongly applied it. His belief was secondhand. He had learned it in a Sunday school class. But what he had learned was wrong. The stumbling block principle doesn't apply to something that merely offends or disappoints other Christians, which is what he did. It only applies to something that ruins them spiritually. Paul isn't telling us to cater to all the petty prejudices and legalisms of other Christians.

That illustrate quite well what it means to get what we believe firsthand. It means we go straight to Scripture itself and interpret and apply it correctly. It also illustrates why we should. It's because the people who teach us can be wrong.

## **HOW TO GET IT FIRSTHAND**

Now, I know at this point what some of you are thinking. You're thinking that you aren't capable of getting what you believe firsthand. But you are and here's how – by doing two things.

First, become a disciple of Jesus. It opens us up to the ministry and work of the Holy Spirit if we do. Well, one of His ministries or works is to make us spiritually competent to understand Scripture. He actually enlightens us and enhances our understanding as we read and study it.

Second, learn and follow the right principles for interpreting and applying Scripture. Every time we interpret and apply a verse or

passage, we're following principles for doing so and there are no exceptions to this. The issue is never whether or not we're following principles – because we are. The issue is whether they're right or wrong ones. Our call is to learn and follow right ones.

Some Christians consider this a non-spiritual thing and balk at doing it. The Holy Spirit is all we need, they say, and thinking otherwise demeans His person and work. But it doesn't.

This past year, I heard a staff member of one of our Friends churches preach a sermon at District Meeting. This man is a devoted follower of Jesus whom I hold in highest regard. He preached that night from Psalm 46:10, which says, *"Be still and know that I am God."* The problem was that he totally misinterpreted the verse, just like almost everyone does who preaches or teaches from it. It doesn't mean at all what he said it means. He failed to follow one of the fundamental principles for interpreting Scripture. Always interpret a verse in its immediate context.

My point is this. We may be disciples of Jesus and have the Holy Spirit just like that staff member does. But we will misinterpret or misapply Scripture if don't follow the right principles for doing so.

So, learn and follow the right principles. I've written a 117 page study called *Biblesmiths* that will enable you to do just that. I'll be glad to give you a copy if you ask.

## **CONCLUSION**

I close this morning with the opening words of verse 16, *"All Scripture is inspired by God."* That means that its authors wrote down what God Himself had revealed to them. Scripture is, therefore, literally the written word of God. Because it is, don't spend the rest of your life relying on others to tell you what it means. Go straight to the source and get it firsthand instead.