

# SOME COMMONLY MISAPPLIED SCRIPTURES

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## Introduction

The goal of honest and earnest Bible students is to ascertain what the Scriptures **actually** teach. It must always be our desire to make sure that we are not drawn too quickly to what a passage **seems** to say before we are certain that it does **in fact** say what it **sounds** like it says. Upon careful examination, we sometimes discover that the two are not the same. Is it possible that we misuse some passages, even familiar ones? It is not only possible; it is a reality, as I hope to demonstrate. I have not heard anyone promote any sort of error due to misusing such passages. Indeed, the doctrines/practices they think they see in these verses are Biblical, but this does not excuse misapplication of Scripture. One should never rest a principle of truth upon shallow and faulty interpretation. Let us not review and examine some of these passages:

### 2 Timothy 2:15

The KJV reads: "Study to show thyself approved unto God,... rightly dividing the word of truth." Brethren often suggest that this passage is about Bible study in a sense that differs from what the verse actually teaches. While carefully reading and discerning the meaning of Scripture (i.e., studying it) is an essential part of living for Christ, this is not the meaning of *study* in this particular verse.

The word *study* translates the Greek word, *spoudason*, which means "to hasten, exert oneself, endeavor, give diligence" (*Thayer, Vine*). From the beginning of the chapter, Paul instructed and exhorted Timothy concerning his work as a Gospel preacher. In all of these things he was to strive diligently for God's approval. Therefore, the message to us is that we should diligently endeavor to seek God's approval in all that we may think, say, or do. *Study* likely conveyed this idea when the KJV was translated, but it is rarely, if ever, so used in modern parlance. Only one entry under *study* in *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* is close to the meaning of *spoudason* ("endeavor, try"), and it is far down the list of definitions and current usages.

The KJV translators were far more consistent in their rendering of *spoudason* in the remainder of the New Testament, as the following citations demonstrate:

- "As thou art in the way, *give diligence* that thou mayest be delivered from him..." (Luke 12:58)
- "*Endeavouring* to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3)
- "But we, brethren,...*endeavoured*...to see your face with great desire" (1 *The.* 2:17)

- "Do thy *diligence* to come shortly unto me" (2 Tim. 4:9, 21)
- "Bring Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their journey *diligently*, that nothing be wanting unto them" (Tit. 3:13)
- "Wherefore the rather, brethren, *give diligence* to make your calling and election sure..." (2 Pet. 1:10)

Had *study* not appeared in 2 Timothy 2:15, it is unlikely that anyone would ever have misapplied it as so many have done and continue to do. The ASV rendering of this verse is clearly superior: "Give diligence to present thyself approved unto God..." In place of *study* various other translations have the following: "Bend your every effort," "Earnestly endeavor," "Earnestly seek," "Try hard," "Let it be your care," "Aim first at," "Be eager."

Further, some brethren may assume that Paul's exhortation relates to Bible study due to its final injunction, *rightly dividing the word of truth*. However, this assumption likely would never have been made were not the misleading word *study* at the verse's beginning. True, we must be earnest students of the Word to be able to handle it aright, but again, both the context and the meaning of *spoudason* demonstrate that studying the Bible is not Paul's emphasis here. Rather, he urges us to give earnest attention to everything God requires of us. We will thereby be able to meet with His approval and not have to cower in shame before Him. None should infer from the foregoing comments that I am suggesting that our approval by God does not also depend upon our rightly handling/dividing His Word (i.e., correctly interpreting and dispensing it to others).

The Bible is not lacking in exhortations concerning serious study of God's Word (e.g., Psa. 119; Hos. 4:6; Mat. 22:29; Rom. 10:17; Col. 1:10; Heb. 5:12–14; 1 Pet. 2:2; 2 Pet. 1:5; 3:18; et al.). However, 2 Timothy 2:15 is not among them. It is ironic that a passage that so strongly emphasizes a proper handling of God's Word has been so frequently and consistently mishandled.

### **Revelation 2:10b**

The Lord promised the church at Smyrna, "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life" (ASV). This statement is frequently quoted at funerals, indicating that if one has lived faithfully until his time of his death, the Lord will reward him with everlasting life. Surely, no one doubts that this is the consistent implication of Scripture. Numerous passages so teach explicitly (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:58; Gal. 6:9; 2 Tim. 4:6–8; Heb. 3:14; 6:10; et al.). The principal purpose of the Bible is to so prepare, equip, and encourage us that we may be faithful to Christ until we die, thus reaching Heaven at last.

To make such a general application of this passage, however, one must ignore both the context and the purpose of these words of encouragement. The context is clearly stated earlier in the verse: "Fear not the things which thou art about to suffer: behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days." *Faithful unto death* must be understood in relation to persecution, suffering, trial, tribulation, and imprisonment, which the devil was going to bring against the saints at Smyrna. Therefore, this promise does not relate to "ordinary" Christian living, nor is it an exhortation to life-long faithfulness. Rather, the Lord's purpose is to exhort those beleaguered brethren to faithfulness, **even if they must die** for the Lord. One who makes a mere general application of this exhortation misapplies it and borders on insulting the Lord's martyrs.

While consideration of its context alone will prevent the careful student from misapplying this passage, linguistic issues make the meaning of the Lord's statement even more certain. One need not be a Greek scholar to profit from what the scholars say. Simple analysis of some Greek words in Revelation 2:10 will further help us understand it. In the clause, *faithful unto death*, *unto death* translates the Greek prepositional phrase, *achri thanatou*. According to Thayer, *achri* is a preposition of manner or degree, and when it precedes *thanatou* (i.e., "death"), it means "to undergo even death."

While a few versions (e.g., NASB, NKJV) render the clause *faithful until death*, the meaning is unchanged—until martyrdom if necessary. I by no means recommend use of "modern speech" versions or one-man paraphrases for one's basic study Bible, but occasionally these versions catch the essence of a Scriptural statement. Such is true of the Lord's statement to Smyrna:

- "Be faithful, though you have to die for it..." (Moffatt)
- "Prove faithful even unto death..." (Goodspeed)
- "Each one of you must prove faithful, even if you have to die..." (Williams)
- "Be faithful, even if you have to die for it..." (Weymouth)
- "Be loyally faithful unto death [that is,] even if you must die for it..." (Amplified Bible)
- "Remain faithful even when facing death..." ..(Living Bible)

Let us ever urge one another to be faithful every day to the very end of our earthly sojourns. However, Revelation 2:10 is not the passage upon which to base such exhortations.

### **Romans 3:23**

In Romans 3:23 Paul states a simple conclusion, based on his discussion of salvation through faith for Jew and Gentile alike: "For all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God"

(Rom. 3:23, ASV). I have heard various brethren, some of them Gospel preachers, misquote this verse as follows: “For all have sinned, and **have fallen** short of the glory of God” (emph. DM). Admittedly, this misquotation does not involve one in teaching error. Obviously, if all have sinned, they have all done so because they have fallen short of God’s glory. (The KJV rendering, “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God,” tempts one to understand Paul to be saying that “all have sinned, and [**have**] come short.”)

However, Paul is not merely repeating himself in these two predicate forms, *have sinned* and *fall short*. Rather, the apostle uses two distinct verb tenses. *Have sinned* is an aorist tense form in the Greek New Testament (*hemarton*). The sense is that all mankind, from the beginning and in all of history up to the point of Paul’s statement, had sinned. However, *fall short* is a present tense form (*husterountai*), indicating continuing action—that is, men not only sinned in the past, but they were (and are) continuing to sin. Paul’s statement here is a strong declaration of the universality of man’s sinfulness from the beginning of time, continuing in the present, and, by implication, into the future. Men could not be justified from sin through the works of the law (v. 20). Thus, because of the universality of sin through all time, he sets forth the need for justification and redemption in Christ (v. 24).

#### **Romans 14:23**

Paul concluded Romans 14 as follows: “But he that doubteth is condemned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith; and whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (v. 23). Numerous times over the years I have heard statements similar to the following: “Romans 10:17 says, ‘So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God’ (KJV), and Romans 14:23 says that ‘whatsoever is not of faith is sin.’ The practice of \_\_\_\_\_ (e.g. sprinkling) is therefore sinful because it is not in the Word of God and cannot be done ‘of faith.’”

All who understand New Testament teaching relative to the act of baptism will readily recognize that the conclusion is true, namely that the practice of sprinkling is not in the Word of God and is sinful. However, Paul’s statement in Romans 14:23 has nothing to do with this conclusion. The key to understanding what Paul is teaching in this verse is to recognize the sense in which he uses *faith* in the latter part of this verse.

Our English word, *faith*, is used in at least three senses in the New Testament:

1. It is used in an objective sense to refer to the entire body of New Testament doctrine, the Gospel as a whole. It usually appears with the definite article in such cases (i.e., “the faith”) when so used (e.g., Acts 6:7; 13:8; 1 Tim. 4:1; Jude 3; et al.).

2. It is used in a subjective sense, to refer to the belief and trust one possesses in a person, principle, or other entity. *Faith*, when thus referred to in the New Testament is based upon substantial evidence (Mark 16:16; John 8:24; 20:30–31; Rom. 10:17; Heb. 1:1; Jam. 2:14–26; et al.). As seen in the foregoing passages, faith or belief in God, Christ, and in the Gospel are the very foundation of salvation through Christ.
3. The third sense in which *faith* is used in the New Testament is also subjective in nature, but distinct from number 2 above. *Faith* in this sense relates to a matter of one's own persuasion or opinion of the rightness or wrongness of a matter of option. Admittedly, this application of the term is rare, but it is nonetheless demonstrable.

Paul uses *faith* with this meaning in Romans 14. Paul begins the chapter by saying: "But him that is weak in faith receive ye, yet not for decision of scruples. One man hath faith to eat all things: but he that is weak eateth herbs" (vv. 1–2). He is definitely not talking here about **the** faith, that is, the Gospel, so he is using *faith* in some subjective sense. He can hardly be talking about one's faith in Christ or the Gospel. The point of the entire chapter from its beginning is to discuss practices that are not regulated by God or the Gospel, particularly whether to eat meat and herbs or to eat only herbs and no meat (v. 3). The one "weak in faith" in verse 1 is the same as the "weak" who only "eateth herbs" in verse 2. The other man in these verses is one who has "faith to eat all things." It is manifest therefore that *faith* in this context refers to one's personal persuasion, opinion, or conscience concerning the practice of eating flesh.

In verse 22 he uses *faith* with the same meaning as in verses 1 and 2: "The faith which thou hast, have thou to thyself before God" (v. 22a). The faith one has in Christ and His Word is **not** to be kept to oneself, but is to be spread abroad to all who will hear (2 Tim. 2:22). However, the "faith" in verse 22 is to be kept to oneself, so it cannot refer to one's faith in Christ and the Gospel. The "faith" that is to be kept to oneself is one's own personal scruples about whether or not to eat meat, as in verses 1 and 2.

This is also its meaning when Paul says, "because he eateth not of faith; and whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (v. 23). His statement is a strong warning that one dare not eat meat (or do anything else) while being persuaded it is wrong to do so. Such behavior violates the conscience and badly damages one's own character and personal integrity. It constitutes sin. Even if the practice is not wrong in itself (as eating meat is not, 1 Tim. 4:3–5), eating it under the conviction that it is wrong is sinful. It is in this context that Paul says that if a matter is "not of faith it is sin," meaning that if one is not fully persuaded in his own mind of the rightness or innocence of a practice, he dare not do it lest he sin. Let us not misuse Romans 14:23 to mean something Paul did not mean.

## 1 Corinthians 2:9

Paul addressed the Corinthians as follows in 1 Corinthians 2:9: “But as it is written, Things which eye saw not, and ear heard not, and which entered not into the heart of man, whatsoever things God prepared for them that love him.”

His words are a combination of quotations from Isaiah chapters 64 and 65. Uncritical readers might assume that this statement refers to the indescribable and unimaginable beauty of Heaven. This is exactly what many have assumed—erroneously. As with Revelation 2:10b (reviewed here last month), I have heard preachers use this as an appropriate passage for the funeral of a dedicated saint. Unquestionably, Heaven is a place that no human being can either describe or imagine and it awaits the faithful. It is also a place that God, through Christ, has prepared for His faithful disciples (John 14:2–3). However, 1 Corinthians 2:9 does not remotely relate to the subject of Heaven. One must completely ignore the context of the passage in order thus to misapply it.

To what does Paul refer in 1 Corinthians 2:9? Even a cursory reading of the context reveals the subject matter clearly. Paul begins the chapter by reminding the brethren that he did not attempt to impress them with oratory or human wisdom, but simply preached the crucified Christ (vv. 1–4). The Holy Spirit powerfully demonstrated the fact that God was the source of his message (v. 5). Although he did not bring them a message of wisdom from the world or its rulers, he did bring them a message of wisdom—wisdom from God (v. 6).

God’s wisdom through the ages (His plan to redeem mankind) was inscrutable and hidden, even to rulers and all of their resources (vv. 7–8). The Holy Spirit used these facts to prompt Paul to remember some statements Isaiah had made seven centuries earlier, which he then quotes (v. 9). His point in this verse is to emphasize the fact that no man or group or men through all of the ages possessed enough knowledge or wisdom to “figure out” God’s gracious plan of salvation. Rather, the only way that men could know God’s will was by His revelation of it (v. 10), which, Paul says, He revealed “unto us” (i.e., the apostles [John 14:26; 16:13]). This revelation was in **words** from God (i.e., verbal inspiration)—not from human wisdom, but from wisdom that the apostles were taught by the Holy Spirit (v. 13).

Peter also expounded upon the same hidden-for-ages, but now-revealed-plan-of-God theme. Even the inspired men before the apostolic era could comprehend **only the limited concepts** God revealed to them as they foretold various details of His great plan:

Concerning which salvation the prophets sought and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: searching what time or what manner of time the Spirit

of Christ which was in them did point unto, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glories that should follow them (1 Pet. 1:9-11).

Our gratitude should never end for the privilege of living in the time when God's wonderful plan of grace for our salvation has been fully and finally revealed, and that we have had the opportunity to believe and obey it.

While Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 2:9 does **not** refer to Heaven, a passage that **does** beautifully refer to the unimaginable glories of the eternal heavenly realm is 2 Corinthians 4:17–5:1:

For our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if the earthly house of our tabernacle be dissolved, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal, in the heavens.

### **1 Corinthians 2:14–16**

While we are in 1 Corinthians 2 we may as well consider some other verses that are often misunderstood and misapplied. Beginning with verse 14 Paul wrote:

Now the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; and he cannot know them, because they are spiritually judged. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, and he himself is judged of no man. For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he should instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:14-16).

Two groups of people misuse the foregoing passage in two different ways. The first group teaches a grievous error based on its misapplication. Denominationalists and some liberal brethren (e.g., Arlie J. Hoover of ACU) erroneously argue that the "natural man" is a non-Christian who does not have any direct help from the Holy Spirit to understand His Word. He is therefore unable correctly to interpret Scripture. However, they aver, the Christian has such help. (Akin to this aberration is the idea some brethren have been arguing of late that by means of the Holy Spirit's dwelling in the Christian, the Spirit aids one in understanding the Scriptures.) This direct-help-from-the-Holy Spirit error has no Scriptural foundation whatever, but is the figment of fertile human imaginations.

The second group does not teach error in its misapplication of this passage. This group, as the one above does, alleges that the "natural man" is a non-Christian. However, it does not blame his lack of understanding upon the absence of the Holy Spirit's direct help, but upon the fact that he is rebellious toward God. It points out that as long as the sinner continues in this attitude he will not understand God's will because he chooses not to. Of course, the New Testament teaches that one's attitude does affect his understanding of the Truth (e.g., John

7:17; 8:31–32; Acts 2:41; 17:11–12; 1 The. 2:13; et al.). One’s **attitude** toward God’s Word is not the point of Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 2:14–16.

Remember, Paul spends the first nine verses of the chapter emphasizing the fact that the wisest and most powerful men, from their mere human resources, could never comprehend or discover God’s plan for man’s redemption. He devotes verses 10 through 16 to declaring the means by which the mystery has now been made known—by means of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the context indicates that the “natural man” is the man who is not inspired—thus the description: he “receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God.” Since he is not inspired, he has no means of knowing God’s will by himself (independent of an inspired teacher to whom it has been revealed, of course).

*He that is spiritual* is a reference to those to whom God revealed His will—inspired men. At first the apostles alone were thus blessed (John 14:26; 16:13). They later imparted various miraculous gifts to others, including wisdom, knowledge, and prophecy, all of which may have involved inspiration (Acts 8:17; 1 Cor. 12:8–10; 2 Tim. 1:6). The inspired men were able to correctly judge all things and no man had the right to sit in judgment of their infallible message.

#### **Proverbs 22:6**

In the book of Proverbs Solomon addressed numerous statements of sage instruction and advice both to parents and to children. One of these aimed at parents is Proverbs 22:6: “Train up a child in the way he should go, and even when he is old he will not depart from it” (ASV). This passage has been quoted innumerable times to advance the idea that, if parents teach their children as they should, those children will absolutely and always remain steadfast in the faith. Countless sermons have been built upon thus interpreting Solomon’s words. However, if this is the meaning of the passage, we have at least one Scripture that teaches the impossibility of apostasy. Further, this application of the passage implies the cancellation of the free will of that child to reject in later years his upbringing.

Some, citing this proverb, have been quick to judge parents whose offspring went astray after leaving home. The stubborn, undeniable fact remains, however, that a large number of dedicated Christian parents, who did all within their power to rear their children to be stalwart citizens in the kingdom, have suffered the agony of seeing them rebel against and renounce that sound teaching. Further, we can frequently observe the circumstance in which conscientious parents provided **identical** spiritual instruction, environment, and example for a plurality of children, but with great sadness, saw one or more reject it all in later years, while his siblings remained steadfast. The passage does **not** say or mean, as Matthew Henry

(*Commentary*) suggests it might, “when he is old, **it is to be hoped**, he will not depart from it.” Rather, the promise is stated as an unqualified certainty instead of as a mere general, hoped-for principle. How is this apparent paradox explained?

Without controversy God’s Word teaches parents to indoctrinate their children with its spiritual and moral principles (Gen. 18:19; Deu. 6:4–9; Eph. 6:1–4; Col. 3:20–21; Tit. 2:3–4; et al.). Christian parents who neglect this responsibility have no valid excuse. But is this what Solomon was discussing in Proverbs 22:6? Not only many brethren (as noted above), but some commentators believe it is (e.g., Adam Clarke, Matthew Henry). However, *Pulpit Commentary* states: “This [duty of spiritual nurturing] is a very true and valuable rule, but it is not what the author [Solomon] intends.” The late Guy N. Woods says of the common application of this passage: “This is far—very, very far—from what the verse either says or teaches” (*Questions and Answers*, v. 1).

Perhaps some additional translations will help demonstrate the force of Solomon’s injunction. Keil and Delitzsch (*Commentary*) render the passage, “Give to the child instruction conformably to His way; so he will not, when he becomes old, depart from it.” Young’s Literal Translation reads: “Give instruction to a youth about his way, Even when he is old he turneth not from it.” F. C. Cook (*Barnes’ Notes*) states that *the way he should go* would be better rendered, “according to the tenor of his way.” *Pulpit Commentary* states that the Hebrew literally says, “Initiate a child in accordance with his way.”

Keil and Delitzsch believe that Solomon was urging parents to suit their instruction and training to the age and maturity level of each child. Others (Woods, Cook, Pulpit) aver that *his way* or *the way he should go* refers to discovering the child’s disposition, natural capacities, and individual personality traits, and so customizing the child’s rearing and education to such traits. I have believed for many years that this is the message of Proverbs 22:6. Instruction and rearing thus given in harmony with the child’s natural attributes becomes so much a part of the child that it is almost inbred—creating a “second nature” that lasts a lifetime.

Woods points out in his comments on this passage that people almost universally— and erroneously—take *when he is old* to mean *when he is grown* or when the child reaches adulthood (*Q. and A*, v. 1). Rather, this statement means what it says in reference to **old age**, and emphasizes the practical impossibility of finding one who has lived a long cultural, moral, spiritual, or employment life pattern, abandoning it in his declining years.

Obviously, the chances of seeing their offspring mature into stalwart saints as they leave the parental nest to make their own ways are **infinitely increased** if parents have imbued them with Truth and righteousness from their early years (2 Tim. 1:5, 3:14–15). However, the most conscientious training in spiritual and moral principles that godly parents can give brings no guarantee that the children receiving it will remain faithful to it. This fact should not discourage parents from doing their utmost to fulfill their responsibility in this regard, however.

The Bible **does not** teach (whether implicitly or explicitly), either in Proverbs 22:6 or any other place, the impossibility of apostasy or the cancellation of free will under certain circumstances. When one argues an application of this passage that implies either of these heresies he must know that something is dreadfully wrong with his interpretation. Godly parents who did their best by the spiritual training of their children, only to see them later apostatize to false religion or immorality, have no cause for self-blame or guilt. Those children are still individuals with all of the powers to choose their courses that God gave us all as human beings, and they can—and sometimes do—choose darkness over light. Brethren are as uncharitable as they are misguided when they harshly judge righteous parents who have suffered the misfortune of seeing their adult children go astray.

#### **Hebrews 1:1–2**

The magnificent prologue to the letter to the Hebrews begins as follows:

God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom also he made the worlds (Heb. 1:1-2).

Even as a youngster, I can recall both printed and preached material that used these verses as if they set forth an outline of the three Biblical ages or dispensations—Patriarchal (“fathers”), Mosaic (“prophets”), and Christian (“his Son”). That these three distinct periods of history in God’s dealings with men are revealed in the Bible is beyond question, and they are an important broad outline of Biblical history that must be respected. Also, *fathers*, *prophets*, and *his Son* obviously appear in this passage. But, a closer look reveals that these three terms are not used in reference to the three dispensations.

The first remembrance I have of the above use of this passage was in the old Maurice Tisdale “Cottage Meeting” charts that brethren used so effectively to convert hundreds, perhaps thousands, to the Truth in the 1950s. The late Jule Miller updated and expanded these basic “window shade” charts to produce his “Visualized Bible Study” filmstrips, and, more recently, his videotapes. These teaching materials have served as a standard personal evangelism tool for decades. Unfortunately, the “Visualized Bible Study” filmstrips and videos perpetuated the

Tisdale misconception of Hebrews 1:1–2. Careless exegetes, by using these products to teach others, have accepted and spread this misconception far and wide.

Upon a more careful analysis, the Hebrews writer mentions only the **last two** dispensations, those of Moses and Christ. The major theme of Hebrews is the superiority of the law and religion God gave through His Son to the law and religion He revealed through Moses. These opening verses strike this very tone. God used many prophets, beginning with Moses, to reveal His will to the fathers of the Hebrews addressed in this letter, but He no longer speaks through mere inspired prophets as in those days. He has revealed His perfect plan for man's redemption through His Son. In contrast to God's authority as vested in such prophets as Moses and Elijah, His authority is now vested fully in His beloved Son, Whom we must hear (Mat. 17:5; 28:18). Hebrews 1:1–2 does not say that God spoke "unto the fathers **and** the prophets," but, "unto the fathers **in** the prophets." The KJV has, "**by** the prophets," and probably conveys the sense better.

#### **1 Peter 1:21**

Jesus is our perfect example of the way we should live our lives to be well pleasing to the Father. As the song suggests: "He, the Great Example, is a pattern for me." Often, when one wants to emphasize this duty the preacher/teacher will point to 1 Peter 2:21 as a proof text: "For hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that ye should follow his steps" (1 Peter 2:21).

The last portion of this verse clearly exhorts us to follow the example the Lord left for us. However, the first part of the verse is generally de-emphasized if it is emphasized at all. Yet it gives the latter part of the verse significant context and even deeper meaning when remembered. The context begins in verse 18 in which Peter orders slaves to obey their masters, even if they are mean. In verses 19 and 20 he commends the trait of suffering wrongfully for sake of conscience. Suffering for righteousness' sake is therefore the background of verse 21.

When Peter says "hereunto were ye called," he is referring to enduring suffering wrongfully. He then suggests Jesus as our example of enduring wrongful suffering, in that he underwent the same. Suffering for righteousness' sake is the lone element of Jesus' life that the apostle sets forth as our example in this passage. When we use to urge people to follow Jesus' example, let us use all of it and urge them to follow Jesus' example of suffering for well-doing. Otherwise we do violence to the great challenge this verse contains.

A great passage to use when urging people to follow the example of Jesus' life as a whole was written by John: "He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also to walk even as he walked" (1 John 2:6).

### **Colossians 2:21**

The New Testament warns us continually about participating in things of the world that will defile us (1 The. 5:22; 1 Tim. 4:6; 2 Tim. 2:16, 22–23; et al.). Some of these things will cause physical, as well as spiritual, harm. Paul's statement in Colossians 2:21 seems ideal at first glance to use when preaching and teaching about things we should avoid. The verse reads: "Handle not, nor taste, nor touch" (Col. 2:21). The only problem involved in thus applying this verse is that Paul had no such idea in mind.

What did he have in mind? Many commentators believe that Paul addressed at least an embryonic form of Gnosticism that would grievously plague the church, beginning at the close of the first century, in his letter to Colossae. Beginning with verse 8 of chapter 2 Paul addresses and issues warning concerning some of the Gnostic-like doctrines, which he calls "philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world." These involve denial of the Deity and authority of Christ (vv. 9–10), certain Judaistic features (vv. 16–17), the worship of angels (v. 18), and asceticism (vv. 20–23).

Verse 21 that speaks of not handling, tasting, or touching certain things is in the midst of this latter context. The incipient Gnostics apparently had set up some rigorous and rigid rules of conduct and were demanding submission to them (v. 20). Those false teachers had been telling the Colossians saints what things they could not handle, taste, or touch, but their only authority for these prohibitions was men. Practicing such a life of unnecessary deprivation might make a big show, cause one to appear to be humble, and punish the body, but it was worthless regarding the control of fleshly lusts (v. 23). Therefore, instead of this being a verse in which Paul is stating certain prohibitions, he is likely quoting what some of the false teachers were saying in their list of humanly-authorized prohibitions.

### **1 Corinthians 1:21**

The latter half of 1 Corinthians 1 (beginning with verse 18) is devoted to contrasting the true wisdom of God with the foolishness of even the most learned, powerful, and reputedly wise men. In the setting of this subject, Paul wrote the following: "For seeing that in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom knew not God, it was God's good pleasure through the foolishness of the preaching to save them that believe (v. 21). I have often hear this quoted in an effort to demonstrate that to those who are worldly (and perhaps even a few brethren!) the

very act of preaching is foolishness. Now it is most likely true that some thus view the work of preaching, but I doubt that this is Paul' meaning here on the following grounds:

1. The wisdom advocated by their Greek philosophers (and which Paul contrasts in this passage with the true wisdom of God) was generally propagated by those who stood and preached it. Likewise, the Jews had men who would stand before their synagogues and read and then preach from the law. It is doubtful, therefore, that either the Greeks or the Jews would consider what they themselves had long practiced.
2. Paul's point in this context is not to contrast wise and foolish acts, but wise and foolish messages, philosophies, and principles.
3. The textual evidence does not seem to support this statement's being a reference to the act of preaching. Whereas the KJV has "the foolishness of preaching," the ASV reads "the foolishness of the preaching." Not only so, but the ASV has the following footnote: "*Gr. thing preached.*"
4. Paul identifies that which both Jews and Greeks called "foolishness." It was the **message**, "Christ crucified," not the **act** of preaching (v. 23).

Assuredly, it was not the mere act of preaching that so riled the Jews that they chased Paul all over the New Testament map, but the message he preached, denying that salvation was through the law and affirming that it was only through the blood of Jesus of Nazareth. It was not the act of preaching that was repugnant to the Greek philosophers in Athens, but the content of Paul's sermon. They could not tolerate the idea of one living God Who created all things and all men, much less the doctrine of the resurrection, which caused them to mock (Acts 17:21–32).

When we leave the impression that Paul was saying that the work of preaching is counted as foolishness by unspiritual men, we misapply what he said. But why would he call the message that is preached, the Gospel, "foolishness"? He simply did so by way of accommodation. Were we writing this statement today we would put *foolishness* in quotation marks to so indicate. Paul used the term the enemies of the Gospel used in reference to it. To them, but not in actuality, it was foolishness. However, in actuality the message of "Christ crucified" is "the power of God, and the wisdom of God" (vv. 23–24). This is why Paul was determined to preach nothing to the Corinthians but "Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (2:2).

### **Ephesians 4:13**

Paul wrote on the subject of unity and peace among brethren in the beginning verses of Ephesians 4, urging his readers to be diligent in their efforts to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (v. 3). He then proceeded to list seven unique spiritual entities (doctrines) on which the Lord's people should/must be one (vv. 4–6). These constitute absolute fundamentals

of the Christian religion. They are obligatory dogmas that one must believe to be a faithful child of God. Those who once walked with us, but who have surrendered some of these elements (e.g., the one body/church, the one faith, the one baptism) have amply earned the identity of “heretic” and “apostate.” They have forfeited the precious unity and peace they once had with their brethren who are still dedicated to the Truth. The only diligent concern for unity and peace many of these have had for years is toward their denominational friends.

Paul writes of “unity” again in verse 13: “till we all attain unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a fullgrown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.” Some see the word *unity* in this verse and assume that Paul is also writing about unity among brethren here as he was in verse 3. I believe this assumption is erroneous.

Note first the apostle’s words in verses 7–12, the immediate pre-context of verse 13. He begins a discussion of spiritual gifts in verse 7, especially as they resulted in offices/functions in the early church: the appointment of some as apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors/teachers (Greek construction indicates that these two should be taken as one class), respectively (v.11). While two of these classes (evangelists and pastors/teachers), as we learn elsewhere in Scripture, were to be permanent in the church, the other two (apostles and prophets) relate to miraculous callings or appointments. From the listings of spiritual gifts in Romans 12:6–8 and 1 Corinthians 12:4–11, 28–29 it is obvious that some spiritual gifts involved appointments besides those of apostles and prophets.

In the context of Ephesians 4:11 we should understand that all four of these “offices” resulted from miraculous gifts/appointments (cf. vv. 7–8). These were for the purpose of “perfecting” (completely equipping) the saints that they might serve and that the infant church might be edified (v.12). These were to last “till we all attain unto the unity” of which he writes in verse 13.

Note second that it is not a “unity of the faithful” nor merely a “unity of faith” (i.e., one’s own faith in Christ), but a “unity of **the** faith” that Paul discusses here. *The faith* is frequently used in an objective sense by the inspired writers to refer to the entire body of doctrine that comprises the Gospel. “The faith” is that which men obey in becoming Christians (Act 6:7; cf. Mark 16:15–16), from which men sometimes fall away (1 Tim. 4:1), and for which we are commanded to “contend earnestly” (Jude 3). I therefore understand Paul to be saying that the spiritual gifts/offices mentioned in verses 7–12 will somehow produce a “unity” (i.e., unanimity, agreement) of the Gospel, the doctrine of Christ.

Note third the post-context of the expression, *the unity of the faith*, in verse 13. The gifts/offices that will produce the “unity of the faith” will also produce: (1) unity of “the knowledge of the Son of God,” (2) “a fullgrown man,” and (3) “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” All of these are expressions relating to spiritual maturity and the means of attaining it, rather than to oneness among brethren.

Note fourth the remaining post-context verses (14–16) which state that in attaining the “unity of the faith” we will be able to (1) grow out of spiritual childhood (literally, infancy) and (2) grow up in all things into Christ.

Rather than referring to unity among brethren in the church, *the unity of the faith* refers to the completion of the written Word, by which the early saints would have the means of attaining complete knowledge of the Christ and of thereby becoming “fullgrown.” At the time Paul wrote to the Ephesians the New Testament had not been completed in written form. There was still the need for inspired apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors/teachers to teach infallibly God’s revelation with both tongue and pen.

Accordingly, God gave to the church men with such spiritual gifts to serve, perfect, and build up the church in its infancy. God would (and did) provide these inspired men to do their work “till we all attain unto the unity of the faith,” that is, until such a time as the perfected, completed Word of Christ had been made available to the whole church in a permanent (i.e., written) form. After this time the perfected Word would enable and empower the church to have the knowledge and the maturity the Lord desired it to achieve.

Ephesians 4:7–16 is thus closely parallel to 1 Corinthians 13:8–13, which speaks of the completion of the Gospel message as “when that which is perfect is come” (v. 10). As Ephesians 4:7–16 implies, 1 Corinthians 13:8–10 explicitly teaches that the miraculous spiritual gifts/offices would “cease” and “be done away” when the completed message of Truth was realized. Paul even uses the same analogy in both passages—the development from childhood to full-grown manhood—to illustrate the temporary need for the miraculous element in the apostolic church.

### **Hebrews 12:23**

Hebrews 12:23 reads as follows: “To the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect.” This verse is obviously in the middle of a long sentence, in which the inspired writer is contrasting the superiority of the New Testament economy with that of Moses. More than once

through the years I have heard people carelessly use the phrase, *church of the firstborn*, as if it were synonymous with *church of Christ*. However, this is not the case at all because *firstborn* cannot refer to Christ here.

While it is not apparent in the common English translations, *firstborn* is a plural term and would more clearly be rendered, “firstborn ones.” However, one does not have to know any Greek to discern this fact. The very next words of the verse, *who are enrolled*, show plainly that *firstborn* is plural. This description of the church refers to its membership—it is composed of those who are enrolled in Heaven, that is, those who have been cleansed by the blood of Christ and are saved (cf. Acts 2:37; Phi. 3:20; Rev. 3:5; 20:12–15; et al.).

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