

Versemeal: How Not to Study the Bible

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I love Bible studies. I love everything about them. I love getting to teach them, I love getting to prepare for them, and I especially love listening to other people lead them. We learn more studying together than we do by ourselves, and most of the spiritual growth that will take place in our lives comes not when we listen to sermons but when we study the Bible, both individually and collectively.

Bible study is so important because that is how we learn to be like God. The way that we study the Bible, then, will affect not only the knowledge we gain about God but how able we are to conform our lives to his image. We must make every effort to study the Bible correctly so that we can both learn all the things God is telling us about him, and so that we can mold ourselves into the image of our creator.

It has been my experience that there is one mistake that occurs more often than any other in both Bible studies and sermons. Ever since the Bible was divided up into chapters and verses, there has been an increased temptation to both read and understand the Bible in "versemeal" fashion. We do this when we isolate a single verse from its textual, historical and social context and then apply it in any way that we, separated by nearly 2000 years of time, understand the words. There are a few reasons why this is a very bad way to study the Bible.

Firstly, this is not how the Bible was intended to be understood. The Bible, the New Testament in particular, is a series of letters that were meant to be understood holistically. Granted, there are portions of these letters that deal with specific topics, but when we ignore the whole to focus on a single verse, we destroy the thought progression of the letter. Secondly, if we remove the original thought progression, we are no longer dealing with what God is telling us, but what we want God to tell us. If we are given leave to run around and select single verses at will to prove our point, there are all sorts of teachings we can derive from the Bible. However, if we force ourselves to deal contextually, socially, historically and textually, with a passage, we are constrained by the word of God and forced to critically examine what God is saying to us.

A final note, though by no means the final note, if we force ourselves to examine the context of every verse, it will keep us from running off into places the Bible never intended to go. Often this will happen when we define a word differently than the Biblical writer did. However, if we force ourselves to look at everything a given passage says, along with its historical and geographical setting, many times we are made to define the words in the same way the writer was using them.

A good example of this is found 1 Timothy 3.15. Throughout time, the word "church" in this verse has been defined many different ways by many different people. However, when we look at the context of the letter—it's written to a man at a local congregation about how to act in and organize that group—we can see that the word is simply referring to a local congregation of Christians in Ephesus.

The Bible is a wonderful tool for learning about God and learning to be more like God. It contains information able to make us wise unto salvation, but we must use the Bible correctly, that is contextually and not in versemeal fashion, or we will have a hard time understanding what God is telling us in the Scriptures.