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## **2 Timothy 3:14–17, ESV**

*<sup>14</sup> But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it <sup>15</sup> and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup> All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*

### **One Last Act in the Name of God.**

Consider the following from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 12, from the ESV:

*<sup>33</sup> “Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. <sup>34</sup> You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. <sup>35</sup> The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. <sup>36</sup> I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, <sup>37</sup> for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”*

To provide some context for the quote, Jesus has recently been accused by the

Pharisees of breaking the Sabbath because he healed someone on the Sabbath.

These religious leaders have a very superficial understanding of their Scripture.

They have highlighted brief passages with a yellow marker and have memorized

those parts, but they don’t understand the context of Scripture as a whole. They

know that in Deuteronomy, God has established the Sabbath as a day of holy worship and rest. The problem is a theological one. The Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, repeatedly portray God as a God of love, and as all people having been made in his image and thereby deserving of grace. The word “theology” comes from the Greek word “*theos*”, meaning God, and the Greek word “*logos*”, meaning Word. The word “theology” refers to our understanding of the nature of God, and to us, as Christians, like the Jews, it comes down to our understanding of Scripture, of the Word of God. The Pharisees wanted to condemn Jesus for healing a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, but didn’t understand that in God’s mind, the overriding issue is that we treat each other with love and kindness. Jesus responds by telling them that he knows very well that if one of these Pharisees were to lose a sheep in a pit on the Sabbath, he would rescue the sheep. Jesus implies that they are hypocrites for being willing to save a sheep that costs them money - but save not a human. He goes on to tell them that what matters is the fruit of one’s acts and one’s words, not the letter of the law. Jesus tells them that they need to better understand the teachings of God before they start accusing him of being the evil person. He tells them this: “<sup>36</sup> *I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, <sup>37</sup> for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.*”

A while back, this passage was quoted to me by a man who was very sick with cancer. We'll call him Doug. Doug was contemplating terminating his treatments because he wasn't going to be cured. He was grateful that the treatments he had received up to that point had allowed him to be alive and to have a good quality of life and to be with his family. He was at home, having just gotten back from the hospital where he had been told that he could extend his life by weeks or perhaps months with more treatments, but that he wouldn't live any longer than that. And the treatments were now causing him extreme discomfort. If Doug stopped his treatments immediately, though, he would probably die fairly quickly, he said. He was an old work associate of mine, and I was visiting Doug just to check in on him. Doug said that he was conflicted about the issue of continuing treatment. On one hand, he felt that he had had a blessed life and that medically, it was time to let go and pass away. I told him that he had every right to do so.

But Doug said that there was a problem. He said that if he was the only issue, he would just relax and stay home and welcome the eternal Kingdom of God. But, Doug said, his wife was dead. They had a daughter, their only child, who was a single mom. His daughter was having a hard time. Her husband had recently run off and Doug's daughter was caring for a child who had special

needs. Doug was very worried about his daughter. He wanted to see her through the next few months, if he could, until she was set up with a new routine in life where she could keep her job and find help for caring for her daughter. He said that he knew that he couldn't be much physical help to his daughter, but that they were very close and just having him to talk to would mean a lot, he was sure. Then Doug said that Jesus Christ said, *"<sup>36</sup> I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, <sup>37</sup> for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."* So obviously, Doug said, since Jesus made it clear how he was supposed to behave, he was going to call his daughter. He was going to get more chemo treatments to extend his life – because Doug wanted to be there for her. In sum, he had one last act to do for her in the name of God. That's what he would say to his daughter he told me, because by his words he would be either justified or condemned.

Let's step back and talk about the Bible, Scripture, and theology – our understanding of God and God's relationship to us. This seems to go against a common tendency in Christian churches today: serious Bible analysis is being dropped in favor of feel-good Christianity, where Christians are told that God loves us, forgives us of everything, and in fact, God will make us rich and happy. The focus is on validating our actions and feeling better about ourselves - even if

we live selfish, unforgiving, secular lives where Jesus is no more than a magical friend. But superficial faith doesn't help us develop true Christian beliefs that are reflected in the way we live. It's not how we develop personal convictions that we can lean on when we make small and big decisions. It's not how to honor the fact that we are made in the image of God. Many Christians today understand very little about the Bible beyond knowing a few brief inspiring passages and perhaps highlighting them in the Bible with a yellow marker.

Let's talk theology. We'll start with the Bible. Second Timothy is one of three so-called Pastoral letters, along with First Timothy and Titus. All three letters claim, in their text, to have been written by Paul, but his authorship is far from universally accepted. They are called pastoral letters because, unlike other letters attributed to Paul, they were written to individual pastors, not to churches. If Paul did write them, he would have had to have done so very late in life. In fact, these three letters describe travels of Paul that are very difficult to reconcile with the chronology of Paul's travels as presented in Acts and in other letters of Paul, ones that we are confident he did write. The only possible way of making both timelines logical would be if the travels described in the Pastoral letters occurred after the content of Acts concluded. But it is strongly believed that Paul was executed by the Romans just after the events described in Acts. This would mean

that Paul somehow survived, returned to the eastern Mediterranean area, and began a new evangelical effort. What is perhaps more likely is that someone else, after the death of Paul, wrote these letters in his name. But we don't know for sure who in truth wrote these letters.

Either way, there is nothing wrong with these letters. They are beautiful; they certainly belong in the Bible. They represent true, ancient Christian thought. These letters are often said to have "third generation" content. Paul represented the first generation of Christians; these are people who knew Jesus or were contemporaries of the Apostles. Timothy and Titus were second generation Christians. They did not know Jesus. The purpose of these letters was to give younger pastors like Timothy preaching in Ephesus and Titus preaching on Crete advice on how to spread the Word to a third generation of Christians, people far removed from the lives of Jesus and the Apostles, from the events that are described in the Gospels and in the Book of Acts. Importantly, many of those in Timothy's and Titus' churches were children of Christians – and not raw converts themselves. Timothy and Titus represented the first generation of a challenge that the church has had to confront for two millennia since then - and is so critically important today - and that is how to keep passing on the faith from generation to generation. It takes a lot of faith to believe something you did not

witness, and that your parents did not witness. Consider 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy, which proports to be a letter written by Paul while he is in prison. The letter is directed to Timothy, who has been introduced to us in the Book of Acts as a sort of junior missionary serving under Paul. He was later left in charge of the church that Paul founded in Ephesus. The quote comes from Chapter 3 of 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy.

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Now, in the time of Paul and his two mentees, Timothy and Titus, Scripture was Hebrew Scripture, what we call the Old Testament. What would later become the New Testament consisted at that time of various letters and documents that were being individually passed around - but had not yet been collected into a single volume. You can see that Paul's concern here was that when Timothy and Titus serve as pastors, they draw what they teach from Scripture. Scripture was what you began to learn as a child; Scripture was the basis of wisdom and salvation; Scripture taught us to have faith in Jesus Christ; Scripture was breathed out by God; Scripture was the basis for learning and righteousness; Scripture was what made a person complete. In a very literal

sense, ancient Christians were far more literate biblically – and far more concerned with learning Scripture in detail - than most Christians today. They studied Scripture. They developed a theology that would see them through life. That was the thing about early Christianity. It was based on a new theology, one where, because of Jesus, each of us has a personal relationship with God, where God is forgiving, and where we treat all people, especially those with the least power in society, with love and generosity.

Theology. From the perspective of a Christian who has access to the New Testament, theology is an integrated understanding of our relationship to God as implied by the New Testament as a whole. In other words, we take the Bible and break it down into truths that tell us who God is and how God wants us to live. It's all rooted in the New Covenant. Our understanding can be largely intuitive. There is no need to write it down in some formal fashion, as if we were all academic theologians. This should be the goal of every Christian, to understand the Bible, which forms the entire basis of our faith, and from it form the moral, ethical, and spiritual convictions that guide us through life. We don't just wander. We know at every moment where we are. When something happens, we know what to do. We know where we want to go – and we know how to get there.



Now, it might seem obvious that what the Bible tells us is true, and that it should be the basis of our theology. But many Americans have drifted away from their Christian roots. There are certainly some things that most Americans no longer accept as true, even though these things are indeed in the Bible. In fact, a very common popular belief right now is that we all should develop our own set of spiritual truths. People, even those who say they believe in some sort of God, say that formal religion is an archaic, even destructive thing. Let's start with this. Is Jesus just a man who thought he was God and happened to be a genuinely kind, empathetic person who said and did some beautiful things? Or, number one, as the New Testament tells us, is Jesus in a literal sense God? And two, does God truly judge every one of us - with some people being condemned as a result? Depending on whether you truly accept these statements – that Jesus is God and God does judge good and evil - your theology might be quite different. If you believe these things, you may well act very differently in life.

I'd like to get back to Doug. He wasn't like most Americans. He didn't pick and choose. He didn't decide that Jesus was a cool dude who said some inspiring things, and that we're free to decide what to believe and what to not believe. He had a theology that was rooted in a deep knowledge of the Bible. A couple of days after I talked to Doug at his home, he called me. He told me that he wasn't

going to continue his treatments after all. He said that when he told his daughter what he was going to do, she said that she would get through the tough period she was in. She said she would be fine – because of the roots that he had given her as her father. She told him that it was her turn to give to him. She reminded him of something we are told in Colossians: <sup>21</sup>*Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.* She said that this means that fathers should always work to bring out the best in their children, to inspire them to walk in the footsteps of Christ. She said that he had done this, and that this was the most important thing he could ever have done for her. She would be happy, and she would have a good life. And it was because he knew what it was to be a Christian.