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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.*

## **Matthew 12:33–37, 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.”*

## **What’s your theology?**

Today, I want to talk about why I spend so much time up here discussing the meaning and historical context of the Bible. 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 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 is not the way to develop true Christian beliefs that are reflected in the way we live. It's not the way to develop personal convictions that we can lean on when we make small and big decisions. It's not the way to learn how to live as if we were made in the image of God. What's interesting is that it's not that much work to understand the basics of Scripture, what the Bible means, and then from that, develop a personal theology. It just takes some time. And I'll get back to that word – theology. Many Christians today know very little about the Bible. At most, they find very brief, inspiring passages and then mark them with a yellow highlighter. But I don't think the problem is that Christians today are lazy, that they don't have the energy to learn something about Scripture. I think the problem is pastors who are trying to increase church membership and bring in donations, and who think that the best way to do this is by being superficial. These pastors think that by making church entertaining and undemanding, their congregations will be happy. My goal as your pastor, and you will have to tell me if I am succeeding at all, is to incrementally explain what is in the Bible and how we should turn the Bible into a personal theology that can serve as the foundation of our daily lives. There is that word again. What is theology?

Let's start, well, 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.

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.

Our quote for today comes from Chapter 3 of 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy. Here it is, abbreviated: *Continue in what you have learned 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.* Now, in the time of Paul, and his two mentees, Timothy and Titus, Scripture was Jewish Scripture. 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 personal theology that would see them through life. Compared to modern pastors, the ancient pastors, those who led the very early church, were far more concerned with living a life based on a sound theology. Only in very recent times has Christianity abandoned this as a goal.

Theology. I keep using that word. 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 how God wants us to live. We then turn this set of truths into a single life philosophy. It can be largely intuitive. There is no need to write it down in some formal sense, 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. We very consciously turn to the Bible when we are moving through life, deciding what paths to take. Our theology, rooted in the Bible, is like the GPS-based mapping software on our phones or in our cars. We look to it for guidance - and we trust it. Now, it might seem obvious that what the Bible tells us is true. But there are certainly some things that most Americans do not 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, 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 very different. If you believe these things, you may well act very differently in life.

Consider our second quote. It is from Matthew. To provide the 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 passages with a yellow marker and have memorized those parts, but they don't understand the true context of Scripture as a whole. They understand some details, but not the meaning and intent of Scripture. Jesus responds by telling them that what matters is the fruit of one's acts and one's words. They accuse him of a sin, but they are the true sinners. He 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.”*

Recently, this passage was quoted to me by a man who was very sick with cancer. We'll call him Danny. Danny was contemplating terminating his treatments because he was tired of suffering. He was at home, having just gotten back from the hospital where he had been told that he could extend his life by a few months with more treatments, but that he wouldn't live any longer than that. If Danny stopped his treatments immediately, though, he would probably die in a few weeks, he said. He was an old friend of mine, and I was visiting Danny for an unrelated issue when he told me about his medical situation. Danny was very sick looking. He was thin and was clearly in intense pain. He said he had gone home from the hospital to think about whether to go through more chemo just to live a few months. Danny said that he was very tired of trying to fight the cancer, that he was not afraid to die and spend eternity with God. I told him that there was absolutely nothing wrong with stopping his treatments. He had every right to do so. I asked Danny if he had decided what he was going to do. He said yes. If it was just him, Danny said, he would have just relaxed and stayed home and welcomed the eternal Kingdom of God. But, Danny 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 Danny's daughter was caring for a child who was autistic. Danny was very worried about his daughter. He was going to have to call her, he told me. He was going to have to tell her that he was sick. Then Danny said that Jesus Christ is God, and 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, Danny said, since Jesus is God and Jesus made it clear how he was supposed to behave, he was going to call his daughter and tell her that he was there for her. He was going to get more chemo treatments to extend his life – because Danny wanted to be around to help her. That's what he would say to his daughter he told me, because by his words he would be either justified or condemned. Please pray with me.

*God, we are Christians. We believe in the entire Bible. We do not pick and choose nice little verses from the Bible and use them to rationalize whatever we want to do. Rather, we want to digest the Bible, and from it, we want to form a biblically true theology that can guide us through life, through every decision we must make. Help us understand your word. Help us learn to stop every time we must make a decision, whether it is big or small, and see what our theology tells us to do. Then let us do nothing other than what the Bible tells us to do. Amen.*