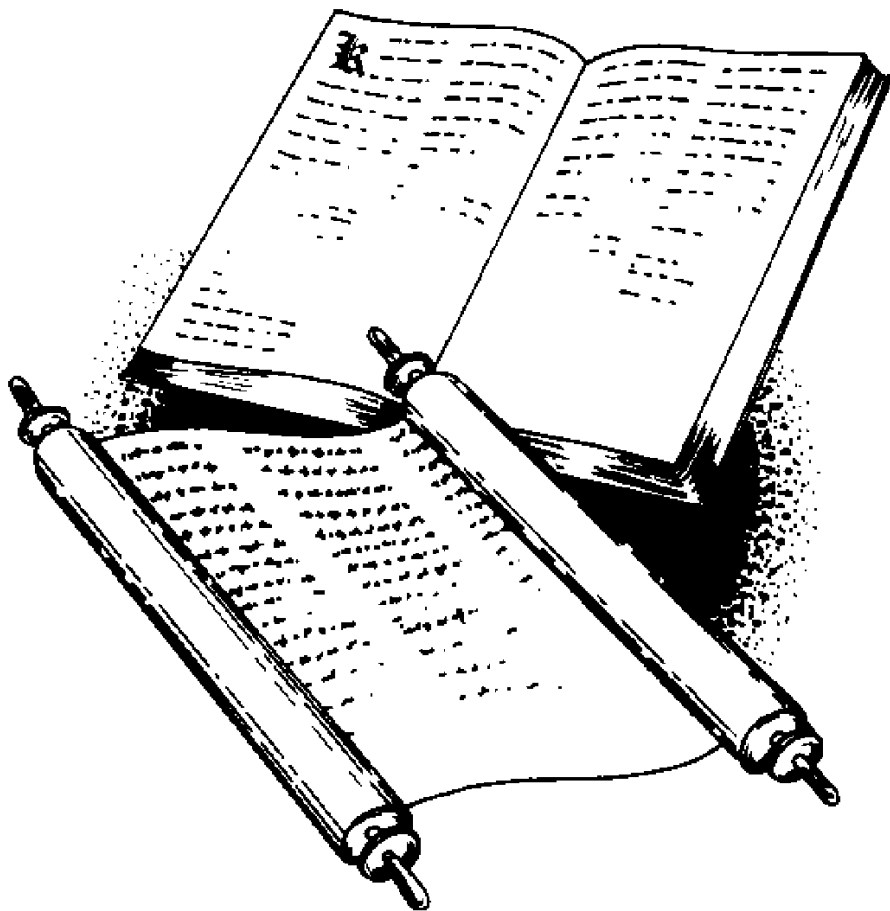
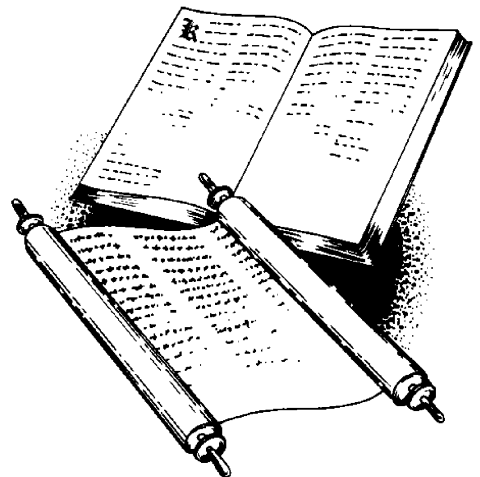


5 ways to mistreat God's



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by Brian Johnston



1. Invalidating the

The famous Scottish minister, James Stewart, who preached at Edinburgh, Scotland, penned the following words in a book written for preachers which he entitled: 'Heralds of God':

'Surely there are few figures so pitiable as the disillusioned minister of the Gospel. High hopes cheered him on his way, but now the indifference and the recalcitrance of the world, the lack of strikingly visible results, the discovery of appalling pettiness and spite and touchiness and complacency which can lodge in narrow hearts, the feeling of personal futility, all these have seared his soul.

No longer does the zeal of God's house devour him. No longer does he mount the pulpit steps in thrilled expectancy that Jesus Christ will come amongst his folk that day travelling in the greatness of his strength, mighty to save. Dully and drearily, he speaks now about what seemed once to him the most dramatic tidings in the world.

The edge and verve and passion of the message of divine forgiveness, the exultant, lyrical, assurance of the presence of the risen Lord, the amazement of supernatural grace, the urge to cry, "Woe is me if I preach not the gospel" - all have suddenly gone. The man has lost heart. He is disillusioned and that for

an ambassador of Christ is a tragedy.'

And not only a tragedy for himself, but surely his disillusioned demeanour can only serve to seemingly invalidate for others the vibrant message he once so brightly expressed.

The religious leaders - the teachers of God's Word - known in Jesus' day as the scribes and Pharisees, had certainly lost their way in God's Word. Although let's be clear that they never at any time had known the joy in the Word which James Stewart speaks about. That much, at least, is clear from what we find recorded at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, chapter 15:

Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, "Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread."

And He answered and said to them, "Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death.' But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, "Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God," he is not to honor his father or his

mother.' And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you:

*'This people honor me with their lips,
but their heart is far away from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.'*" (Matthew 15:1-9)

Notice what was happening here. The Jewish teachers were criticising Jesus' disciples for failing to keep their own time-honoured Jewish traditions. But Jesus had no sympathy with this accusation against his followers. He rather says to the accusers in effect: "I want you to tell me why you prefer to maintain your traditions at the expense of God's plain commands found in his Word."

The mistake these Jewish leaders were making has been made many times since . It's a long-standing feature of religious history down through the ages, right to the present time. Straightforward Bible commands are set aside in favour of keeping the established practices - the traditions - of religious institutions.

To the Jews then, Jesus gave the example of how they were failing to encourage people to honour their father and mother - which is one of the Bible's basic commands, being found among the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). They were encouraging people to break

this command by a misplaced show of piety. Instead of giving a supporting financial contribution to their parents, who were perhaps now elderly and dependent on them, their sons were being taught that it was okay, or even preferable, to say that their funds were dedicated to God, and so couldn't be made available to their parents. This was rank hypocrisy, which probably benefited both themselves and the religious institution at that time.

They dodged this command of God, and thought they were dodging the penalty for dishonouring one's father or mother by using the word "Corban," as Mark calls it (7:11). All someone had to do to evade duty to father or mother was to say, "Corban," or "Gift," all the time hiding behind the idea of using the money for God.

The picture is of a son avoiding his obligation to assist needy parents by uttering the formula: "Whatever that may be by which you might be helped by me, is not mine to give. It is vowed to God." The man, however, wasn't bound to actually give his gift to the temple-treasury because the phrase didn't necessarily go so far as to dedicate the gift to the temple.

By this 'magic' word, as it were, a son who so wished set himself free from obedience to the fifth commandment. Sometimes these disloyal sons even paid the religious leaders for such dodges. It might

even have been the case that some of these critics here were guilty of receiving some of the proceeds!

But the verse I want you to particularly notice is verse 6; we'll read it again, now that we've explained its context. It says this:

... by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition.

The word translated as 'invalidated' ('Ekurosate' / 'akuros') means to deprive something of its authority and power, or to render it null and void. This is what these religious legalists were doing with God's Word. The idea in the word means to neutralize the moral force of the scriptures, and a common way of doing that is by splitting hairs over technicalities.

And this is exactly what these Jews were doing. You remember their initial criticism of Jesus' disciples had been concerning the fact that Jesus' disciples didn't follow the excessive and superstitious rituals about the washing of hands as elaborated in the Jewish traditions of the time.

The Gospel writer, Mark, adds in his record of this same event that this custom of washing extended not merely to their hands before eating, but it also came into play in coming from the market; and also extended to cups, and pots, and brass vessels, and even tables (Mark 7:3,4). They claimed they did this for the sake of cleanliness. That might have been all right, as far as it went. But they also

made it a matter of superstition. They regarded external purity as of much more importance than purity of heart. They'd many foolish rules about the exact amount of water that was to be used, the way in which it should be applied, the number of times it should be changed, the number of those that might wash at a time, and all that sort of thing.

This shows how they had invalidated God's Word or, in other words, how they had denied the moral force of the Word. By all these hair-splitting technicalities - which were, of course, of their own making - they had rendered God's Word null and void in that they had come to regard outward, physical cleanliness as of more importance than moral cleanliness of the heart.

We mentioned how this tendency to honour tradition above the pure Word of God has been a besetting sin of religious history, and an extreme example - not totally dissimilar to what we've been reading about in Matthew 15 - once took place in England. It was, for a while, the practice of religious leaders to urge people to make deathbed grants of their land to the established church of the day. A typical grant would read: "For my salvation, and for the salvation of my predecessors, and for the salvation of my successors, and for the salvation of my wife ... I give and bequeath to God and his Church ... [my land]."

Clearly, this evil practice put deathbed grants of land in the place that can only properly be occupied by Jesus Christ, and so, in the most blatant and wicked way, it invalidated the clear word of God regarding the salvation of the soul – that it is by God's grace through faith, and that in Jesus Christ alone (Ephesians 2:8,9).

So, in summing up, we've been looking at the first of five ways in which it's possible to mistreat God's Word, the Bible - five ways the New Testament itself draws our attention to quite explicitly. The first has been mishandling God's Word through

invalidating it, with Matthew 15 verse 6 as our main text.

The point is, no matter how devoted we are, it can only be safe for us to consider if there's anywhere at all in our life where we're avoiding the power of God's Word - maybe by some means or other of rationalizing the Bible text or over-ruling its plain meaning by appeal to some other source of authority. This, after all, is one of the main distinguishing features of a cult - namely that it elevates some other authority to at least the same level as the Bible.

We have been warned!

2. Neglecting the

Years ago an old man living in New Jersey discovered about \$5,000 in a family Bible: quite a large sum at that time. The bank notes were scattered throughout the Bible, tucked away in its pages.

What had happened was this: in 1874, the man's aunt had died, and part of her will read as follows: "To my beloved nephew, Steven Marsh, I will and bequeath my family Bible, and all it contains, with the residue of my estate after my funeral expenses and just and lawful debts are paid."

The estate amounted to a few hundred dollars, which were soon spent. Thereafter, and for about thirty-five years, his chief support had been a small pension from the Government. So he lived in poverty, and yet all the time, within his reach, there was the precious Bible containing thousands of dollars, sufficient for all his wants.

He must have passed by the Bible many times, on a daily basis more than likely. His eyes rested on it, perhaps his hands handled the old leather-bound Bible, with its brass clasps, but he didn't once open it.

At last, while packing his trunk, to move finally to live with his son, where he intended to spend his few remaining years, he discovered the unknown riches which had always

been in his possession.

What thoughts of regret must have come to his mind! If he'd only opened that Bible years earlier, he could have used the money to great advantage! Instead, the treasure lay idle for thirty-five years, during which time he could have been enjoying it to the full!

A sad story. But there's something infinitely sadder than the experience of this man. It's neglect of the Bible itself. God has given us a valuable treasure in his Word. In this Book of books, the riches of the wisdom, knowledge, love and grace of God are all made known in fullest measure. All our spiritual needs can be met through its pages. And yet these riches, put at our disposal by a loving Father, are often unknown and unused riches, are they not? Instead of being enjoyed, they are so often neglected.

In this booklet dealing with ways of mistreating the Bible - ways against which we are explicitly warned in the New Testament - we come now to our second: the real danger of neglecting God's Word. Our main Bible text which highlights this is found in Acts chapter 6, where we read:

Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a

complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." (Acts 6:1-4)

It's the apostles' words in verse 2 which claim our attention: *"It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables."*

The word translated as 'neglect' ('Kataleipsantas'/'kataleipo') basically means to leave behind. I'm sure we've all known times when the demands being placed upon us bring about a measure of withdrawal from Bible meditation and study, and perhaps from preaching too.

It's good if we react in the wise way in which the apostles did then, by recognizing the problem early and arranging our affairs differently so that we can give attention to the Bible, restoring it to the place it deserves in our lives.

The Lord Jesus himself spoke of this danger of neglecting God's Word in one of his telling word pictures, or parables:

"Behold, the sower went out to sow; and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up.

Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.

Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out.

And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty." (Matthew 13:3-8)

He went on to make totally clear for his disciples - and us - the meaning of that parable when he said,

"When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road.

The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away.

"And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the

deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.

"And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty." (Matthew 13:19-23)

The most relevant part to us is the imagery of the thorny ground. The situation there depicts the man who hears God's Word, but then later the worry of the world, and the deceitfulness of wealth squeeze out any time and place for God's Word in the believer's life.

Mark, in his retelling, expands slightly, when he says:

"But the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful" (Mark 4:19).

The desires for other things - what a lot this covers! How it challenges our hearts before God. Desires for other things, and attention paid to these things, all add up to neglect of God's Word in our lives - a situation which can only leave us spiritually impoverished.

How different was the attitude of the psalmist in Psalm 119, although the way he expresses his desires for God's Word makes it quite clear that he knew the same struggles that we do. His prayer is:

Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes,

*And I shall observe it to the end.
Give me understanding, that I may observe
Your law And keep it with all my heart.
Make me walk in the path of Your commandments,
For I delight in it.
Incline my heart to Your testimonies
And not to dishonest gain.
Turn away my eyes from looking at vanity,
And revive me in Your ways.
Establish Your word to Your servant,
As that which produces reverence for You. (Psalm 119:33-38)*

His prayer is so relevant to us all in this modern world, with all its pressures. Perhaps you sometimes feel there's not enough time to read everything that pours through your letterbox or into your electronic mail inbox? We're living in days of information overload, are we not?! May God help us to be wise, like the apostles in Acts chapter 6, in finding ways to cut down on all that we've got to look at, so that we don't mistreat God's Word by neglecting it. Let's make sure that our crowded lives don't choke out time spent with God around his Word, the Bible, for neglecting God's Word will without fail stunt our spiritual growth.

The psalmist prays: teach me [your Word], make me to walk in [your Word], incline my heart to [your Word], turn away my eyes [from

worthless things] – in effect: take away my desire for other things, and, above all, will you please establish your Word to me, as that which promotes a healthy respect for God in my life.

I feel I need to make that my prayer, would you care to join me?

3. Peddling the Word

Have you ever bought something on eBay that turned out to be a con? Or have you perhaps had no end of hassle when buying a second-hand car? The charming salesperson for whom nothing seemed to be too much trouble when you were at the stage of showing interest, suddenly seems to turn into an evasive and unhelpful individual whenever you make the first legitimate complaint. Of course, not all purchasing experiences are like this. There are many professional and courteous dealers with whom it's a pleasure to do business.

In some parts of the world today, street-peddlers are still commonplace, or people who peddle their wares from house to house. You're much less likely to be able to find them again when you later discover some defect with your purchase. But it was a way of trading that was very common in the ancient world.

Let me ask you, have you ever bought a bag of fruit or vegetables after being attracted to the beautiful produce that was visible through the clear packaging, only to be disappointed when you get home, open the bag and then find that quite a few pieces of fruit hidden away at the centre of the bag are bad? Wasn't it a good idea for the seller not to have placed the bad fruit

where they could be seen?! Tricks like that - tricks of the trade - must be as old as human history itself.

Some Bible writers drew on their knowledge of this type of practice, and used it to illustrate the work of false teachers: those who were mistreating God's Word. Our example is taken from the New Testament, from the writings of the apostle Paul to the Church of God at Corinth, found in his second Bible letter to them, at the end of the second chapter:

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God. (2 Corinthians 2:14-17)

It's that last verse that I'd like to focus on - where Paul says:

For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak

in Christ in the sight of God.

In Paul's time, there were those whom he accuses of 'peddling the Word of God'. The word ('Kapeleuo'/'kapeleuontes') usually had a different, an everyday kind of use in those days. It normally referred to notorious wine retailers in the markets or to hucksters putting good fruit on top of the basket, giving the impression it was good all the way down to the bottom of the basket, whereas in reality that was far from the case.

There's really only one word for traders like that: corrupt. So we find that this word for peddling which Paul uses can equally be translated as corrupting the Word of God. Although this is the only place in the Bible where we find this word, it was, nevertheless, a common word in all stages of Greek, which just goes to show how persistent this kind of fraudulent trading was in everyday life.

The typical kind of dodgy dealer it related to was regarded as a breed apart from those who were described then - by the likes of the Roman writer Plato - as merchants or wholesale dealers. They, by way of contrast, were at the respectable end of the business.

The word whose background we're digging into here included in its scope dealers in victuals and all sorts of wares, but it was especially applied to retailers of wine, with whom adulteration and short

measure were matters of course. One writer (Galen) speaks of these wine-dealers playing tricks with their wines; mixing the new, harsh wines, so as to make them pass for old. Another favourite trick, of course, was the old one of diluting or watering down the wine. These corrupt wine-dealers of the ancient world not only sold their wares in the market, but had wine shops all over the town, where it was not thought respectable to take refreshments. The whole trade was greatly despised.

In fact, so widespread was this corrupt trade, that in Thebes no one who had sold in the market within the last ten years was allowed to take part in government. Plato again wrote that if a city wanted to be respectable, it must - he said - have as few of these retail traders as possible ('Laws', 919). This shows how big a problem it was recognized as being.

Paul here uses the term of those who trade in the word of God, adulterating it for the purpose of personal gain or popularity, diluting it perhaps with human philosophy. Sadly, we still have people like that with us today. Outwardly there is a show of piety, but later reports surface that they have been lining their own pockets. And it happens all over the world: in poor countries as well as rich ones. Those who preach God's Word are not always all that they present themselves outwardly

as being. They don't withstand the scrutiny of closer inspection. They are well compared to the huckster who puts the good fruit on top of the basket, for they trade in the Word to gain popularity and for self-advantage.

That's a terrible abuse of God's Word! - one for which God will bring them into judgement. By their actions many are caused to stumble, and the enemies of God are given opportunity to blaspheme. What they're doing is short-changing others of the fragrance of Christ. In contrast to this despicable behaviour, Paul sets out the example of himself and his companions:

For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God. (2 Corinthians 2:17)

The apostle stresses his sincerity, the preacher of the Gospel must be sincere. He emphasizes that his message is from God; he was sincerely speaking the message that had been delivered to him to speak by the Lord himself. His preaching is in Christ, he says, and in the sight of God. Paul was always conscious of God's eye upon him as he handled the precious truths of God's Word.

Let's continue now with this more positive note, with a comment on the verses which come just before our key text. Let's look at them once again in 2 Corinthians chapter 2:

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? (vv.14-16)

The image is taken from the triumphal procession of a victorious general. A triumph, among the Romans, was a public honour given to a victorious general which took the form of a magnificent procession through the city. The general would usually be dressed in a rich purple robe, and musicians would head up the procession. There would also be a display of carts loaded with the spoils captured from the enemy: horses, chariots, kings, princes, or generals taken in the war, now in chains. During this time all the temples were opened, and every altar smoked with offerings and incense.

Applying all this to himself, Paul regarded himself as a trophy of God's grace, a trophy of God's victorious power in Christ. His almighty conqueror was leading him about, through all the cities of the Greek and Roman world, as an example of the power of God to subdue and to save. Someone has said, "Our only true triumphs are God's triumphs

over us". But what distinguishes God's triumph from that of a human general, is that the captive is brought into willing obedience (2 Corinthians 10:5) to Christ, and so joins in the triumph: God 'leads him in triumph' not merely as someone who has been triumphed over, but also as someone triumphing over God's foes

with God. As the smoke of the victims and incense offered on such an occasion would fill the whole city with their perfume, so the odour of the name and teaching of Christ filled the whole of Corinth.

What a blessing it is when God's Word is handled well!

4. Adulterating the

Perhaps you've heard the story of the country preacher looking for a job. The selection committee ask him, "Do you know much about the Bible?"

"Oh, yes, I know the Bible through and through."

"What's your favourite book?"

"The Gospel by Mark."

"Which part?"

"The Parables."

"Which parable?"

"The parable of the Good Samaritan."

"Can you tell it to the committee?"

He says, "Yes. It goes this way. Once there was this man travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho and he fell among the thorns and the thorns sprang up and choked him. And as he went on he didn't have any money and he met the Queen of Sheba and she gave him a 1000 talents of gold and a 1000 changes of [clothes] and he got into a chariot and drove furiously and when he was driving under a big juniper tree his hair caught on the limbs of that tree and he hung there many days and the ravens brought him food to eat and water to drink and he ate 5000 loaves and 2 fish. One night when he

was hanging there asleep, his wife Delilah came along and cut off his hair and he dropped and fell on stony ground, but he got up and went on and it began to rain and it rained 40 days and 40 nights and he hid himself in a cave and he lived on locusts and honey. Then he went on until he met a servant who said, "Come, let's have supper together," but he made an excuse saying, "No, I can't. I've married a wife and I can't go," and the servant went out to the highways and hedges and compelled him to come in and after supper he went on and came down to Jericho and when he got there he looked up and saw that old queen Jezebel sitting down high up on the window and she laughed at him and so he said, "Throw her down," and they threw her down, and he said "Throw her down again," and they threw her down 70 times 7 and of the fragments that remained they picked up 12 baskets full besides women and children. And they say, 'Blessed are the piece-makers'. Now whose wife do you think she will be in that judgement day?"

Quite a distortion, isn't it? Sadly, verses are often taken out of context, as the Word of God is distorted to lure people into a commitment. But we dare not

preach a forked message. We must never distort the Word of God. That's the kind of thing Paul was speaking against at the beginning of Second Corinthians chapter 4:

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart, but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. (2 Corinthians 4:1,2)

Notice how Paul sets himself apart from those who are 'adulterating the word of God'. The basic idea behind the word ('Dolountes'/'doloo'/delo') is 'to catch with bait'.

Paul is saying that we cannot use deceptive means. James Fenimore Cooper, a demagogue, says, 'a demagogue is one who advances his own interests by affecting or pretending a devotion to the interests of people. Of all the demagogues, the religious ones are the most despicable - they know how to bait the hook.'

Baiting the hook, handling God's Word deceitfully, is the opposite of manifesting the truth. Paul says, we're to hold such a view of the truth as to discard every artful device in public and private.

Paul's word here for 'adulterating' is another word which is only found once in the New Testament. Primarily, it means 'to ensnare'; with

the additional sense of 'to corrupt'. It was used within the society of those times to describe the adulteration of the likes of gold and wine. So it has a similar meaning to the last word we studied in Second Corinthians chapter 2, but this one has a narrower meaning than the one used there. While this one also can mean 'to corrupt', there's no thought of doing it for the sake of financial gain here.

Let's look at the broader context of Paul's words for there are many interesting things here. He says:

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart ...

The danger of losing heart reminds us of the words of James Stewart, quoted from his book, 'Heralds of God'. He wrote:

'Surely there are few figures so pitiable as the disillusioned minister of the Gospel. High hopes cheered him on his way, but now the indifference and the recalcitrance of the world, the lack of strikingly visible results, the discovery of appalling pettiness and spite and touchiness and complacency which can lodge in narrow hearts, the feeling of personal futility, all these have seared his soul.'

'No longer does the zeal of God's house devour him. No longer does he mount the pulpit steps in thrilled expectancy that Jesus Christ will come amongst his folk that day travelling in the greatness of his

strength, mighty to save ... The man has lost heart ...'

The Apostle Paul, by contrast, wrote, 'we do not lose heart' and then continued:

... but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

Literally, as we've shown, Paul's saying we're not to use 'bait' in attempting to 'hook' people with the unadulterated Word of God. It's not about impressing anyone, or seeking to gain a following, as Paul now makes clear:

For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. (2 Corinthians 4:5-10)

Behind these words of Paul, the Old Testament story of Gideon seems to lie in the background. Gideon's story in Judges 7, as you may remember, is an account of how human weakness, with divine help, triumphed. Gideon - still in much fear and trembling - finally overcame overwhelming odds because he was in touch with his God.

Gideon's tiny army of only 300 men surrounded the camp of their enemy in the dark of night. Armed with trumpets and torches concealed in clay jars (pitchers), they were granted a miraculous victory by God. At Gideon's signal, the sound of trumpets broke the silence and the clay jars were smashed as light pierced the darkness.

That's the picture Paul seems to draw on here, as he describes this world as a dark place spiritually, and goes on to tell us that the battle is on for hearts and minds. Regarding the progress of the Gospel, the imagery here does seem to draw parallels with Gideon's defeat of the Midianites.

Referring to the gospel and its ministry (v.1), Paul says we have it as treasure in jars of clay (v.7). This choice of language, which invites the comparison between treasure and clay, would encourage us to think of our ministry of proclaiming the gospel as much more valuable than life itself. What we possess is as treasure, compared to what we are: mere jars of clay.

What's more, these clay jars need to be broken: so that the light of the gospel (v.6); the power that's God's (v.7); and the life of Jesus (v.10) can be seen in this dark world. This is the great positive, and privilege, associated with suffering hardship with the gospel. As you read of these early ministers of the gospel being afflicted, perplexed, persecuted,

struck down and always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus (vv.8-10), picture the breaking of the clay jars. For not only does the truth require to be manifested, but also the life of Jesus (vv.2,11).

As a result, our methods will then reflect the message in being wholly without deceit (v.2).

5. Wrongly dividing the Word

The last way of mistreating God's Word that we draw attention to is all about the error of not handling it in a straightforward way. The Bible itself, in the New Testament, draws our attention to certain people who handled it crookedly - by departing from the straight and narrow.

... Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, men who have gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and they upset the faith of some. (2 Timothy 2:17,18)

These were people who had literally 'swerved away' from the truth of God's Word. They certainly were not handling it in a straightforward way. This way of mistreating God's Word is as old as the race itself. You can trace its origins to the Garden of Eden, where *the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?'"* (Genesis 3:1)

That was a deliberate bending of the truth, for the question was loaded with the subtle insinuation that God was being repressive in holding back something from our first parents - something which was for their good.

Just before we read about the two men who had swerved away from the truth - the two who are named as being like Satan in their behaviour by not handling God's Word of truth in a straightforward way - we read this positive command given to Timothy:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15 NASB).

Or in the words of a different Bible version:

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (NKJV).

This begins to make even clearer what Hymenaeus and Philetus were doing wrong with the Word of God. They were not rightly dividing it. They were not treating it in an honest and totally straightforward way. They were like people ploughing a furrow that wasn't straight, or perhaps like stone masons who cut their stones in a rough and uneven way because they weren't very skilled at their trade.

I remember a time when my wife and I shared a home for a while with

another missionary couple. His wife always made out that she needed 'to straighten up the loaf of bread' after I'd finished cutting it. I'm not entirely convinced that was the case, but some people think there's a background reference here in this word to the task of the household steward as he divided the bread for the household. His task would require him to make straight cuts.

You'll get the point, I'm sure, that the basic idea of the word here for accurately handling or rightly dividing God's Word is 'to cut it straight'. Once again in this booklet we find ourselves studying a word that's only found once in the New Testament.

But in the Greek translation of the Old Testament it was used in Proverbs 3:5,6 for making straight paths. You may remember the verses; they are a favourite with many Christians:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart

And do not lean on your own understanding.

*In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He will make your paths straight.*

That's the very best advice for life. Notice the promise that God will make our paths straight if we trust in him and give him his proper place in our lives. In the New Testament we find that the first disciples - who in all their ways acknowledged Jesus as Lord - were found belonging to what

was commonly called in those days, 'the Way'. By allowing God to make their paths straight in his Word, they had been led into God's Way for their lives of service. And the record is left there on the pages of Scripture for us to follow to this day, exactly by making our path straight in God's Word, or, in other words, by rightly dividing God's Word.

I was trying my hand at sea-angling for the first time recently. My companion was a true expert who knew where the fish were, and who patiently showed me the techniques for correctly handling the rod. I enjoyed the experience, and ended up catching the largest fish that day. It brought home to me the advantages of learning a skill from a real expert.

Priscilla and Aquila had that experience when they teamed up with the apostle Paul at the time when ... *he left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them, and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers. And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.* (Acts 18:1-4)

In fact, I suspect theirs was a double bonus or blessing. I would guess Paul

was a competent tent-maker and knew how to cut the rough camel-hair cloth in perfectly straight lines. So perhaps he had some practical tips to pass on to them regarding their tent-making trade? Rightly dividing the material used in tent-making - making straight cuts in the camel-hair cloth - was a basic skill in Paul's day-job. It's very natural then that he should take up this idea and apply it to the main passion of his life, which was handling the Word of God in his preaching.

It's equally true that, as a trained rabbi, Paul would have been very familiar with the Old Testament work of the priests in Israel as they, in a very precise way, butchered the sacrifices: by dividing the animal into its several parts according to the detailed prescriptions found in the Bible book of Leviticus. And, on at least one occasion, Paul spoke of his preaching ministry in these terms. In Romans chapter 15, he says:

But I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that my offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:15,16)

Might it have been that Paul's analogy between his ministry of preaching and the priest's ministry

of officiating at the sacrifice extended to the idea of him rightly dividing the Word even as the priests had been charged with rightly dividing the sacrificial victims? Perhaps so, we can't be sure.

We'll leave there this important idea of accurately handling the Word of God which, you remember, was in contrast to what those named heretics, Hymenaeus and Philetus, were doing. They were those who had swerved away from the word of truth. To prevent others, like Timothy, from making that same mistake, Paul encourages us all to: *Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15 NKJ).*

As well as the skilfulness required in the process of rightly dividing the word, it's not hard to see that faithfulness and commitment are also necessary qualities. There's the faithfulness that's involved in being a 'workman'; in other words, someone who toils energetically. In handling God's Word accurately there's no such thing as a short-cut or quick fix.

Then there's the degree of commitment which comes across in the instruction to be diligent, to study, to do our best. It demands that we operate at our highest level. If we demand a lot of ourselves in athletic performance or towards

career progression or in academic advancement, why should we not exert ourselves to do our very best in the most important field of study of all? How wrong it is, if Bible study should seem to us to be a matter of low priority. So, as we read, let's observe carefully the context and content of the Bible text, asking - among others - questions like:

- ☆ Who was this written to?
- ☆ What issue is it addressing?
- ☆ How is it expressed in other translations?

Above all, perhaps, we should make

John Wesley's prayer our own: "Lord, make me a man of one book!" And what an impact his life had on England - one to which even secular historians have paid tribute. He preached so many sermons in his life (I think it was something like 40,000) all while travelling around the country on horseback - so much so that some feel he gave another meaning to the expression 'the sermon on the mount'!

So may the Lord make us men and women of one book: the Bible!

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'Search for Truth',

P.O.Box 111, Leigh, England WN7 1WJ

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e-mail: sft@churchesofgod.info