

QUIET TIME

Theme: Correctly interpreting God's Word

- Try to make a specific time every day to meet Jesus Christ through reading and meditating his Word.
- Pray, talk with Jesus Christ and make a few short notes about this Bible passage in your notebook.
- Record what you discover, what speaks to your mind and heart, what you find difficult or what you understood.

- Day 1 Matthew 22:23-33
Whoever does not know the Bible errs
- Day 2 Luke 11:37-52
Whoever changes the Bible into human laws will be judged
- Day 3 Mark 7:1-9
Whoever nullifies the Bible by human traditions, worships God in vain
- Day 4 1 Corinthians 4:6-7
Do not go beyond anything written in the Bible
- Day 5 2 Corinthians 4:1-6
Do not distort the Bible
- Day 6^{BS} 2 Timothy 2:9-19
Correctly handle (interpret) the Bible¹
- Day 7 Titus 1:9-16
Hold firmly to the message of the Bible in accordance with sound doctrine
- Day 8 Revelation 22:10-19
Do not add or take away anything from the Bible
- Day 9 Galatians 1:6-9
Whoever preaches another 'gospel' will be cursed
- Day 10 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16
Whoever proclaims God's Word should expect opposition
- Think about Philippians 1:9-10.
Pray that you may be able to discern what is best.
 - Pray every day for someone or something specific and wait in expectation for what God is going to do (Psalm 5:3).

STUDY

Theme: How you must interpret the Bible

Read study 36 carefully before the next meeting. If you have questions, write them down and mail them to one of your group leaders. We will seek an answer together.

BIBLE STUDY

Theme: A workman who correctly handles the Word of truth

If you like, you may already prepare the Bible Study for the coming meeting by reading through the Bible passage. Make use of the 5-step Bible Study method. The Bible passage is: **2 Timothy 2:1-26**

MEMORISATION

1. Motivation

Jesus memorised Bible verses (Luke 4:4-13). Are you doing that?

2. Memorisation

Memorise this verse in the Bible version of your choice.

BIBLE INTERPRETATION

2 Timothy 2:15

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 (NIV)

3. Review and back-review

Review the last 5 memorised verses once every day and back-review all other memorised verses once every three weeks.

¹ **2 Timothy 2:15** in Greek. "To guide the Word of truth along a straight path" like a road that goes straight towards its goal without being turned aside by wordy debates or impious talk.

36. How you must interpret the Bible

God speaks to us today through the words in the Bible. But how must you read and understand the Bible? Here are five rules of interpretation which you must apply in order to correctly understand and explain the Bible.

1st RULE: DETERMINE THE STYLE OF THE BIBLE PASSAGE

The Bible has not been written in one style of literature, but contains different styles of literature: laws, history, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, revelation, teaching and parables, etc. Each style of literature has its own rules of interpretation!

First ask yourself: “Which style of literature is God using in this Bible passage?”

- Is it laws? (cf. study 9 ‘God’s law and God’s grace’)
- Is it history? (cf. study 10 ‘The historical books’)
- Is it poetry or wisdom? (cf. study 12 ‘The poetical books’)
- Is it prophecy? (cf. study 13 ‘The prophetic books’)
- Is it an apocalypse/revelation? (cf. study 15 ‘The book of Daniel’ and study 19 ‘The book of Revelation’)

Then explain this passage by making use of the rules of interpretation of this style of literature. The rules are found in the accompanying studies.

2nd RULE: DETERMINE WHO IS ADDRESSED IN THE BIBLE PASSAGE

The Bible addresses various kinds of people. Sometimes the truth in a Bible passage is directed to everyone in the world and sometimes it is directed to a limited group of people, e.g. Israel or Christians. Therefore determine who God intends to address in this passage. This is an important rule for the interpretation of promises and threats, prophecies and commands in the Bible.

Ask yourself: “Who does God intend to address in this Bible passage?”

- All people in the world?
e.g. Mark 1:15; 8:34-38; Lucas 14:25-27
- All Christians?
e.g. John 13:34-35; 2 Peter 1:1
- A particular individual?
e.g. 1 Chronicles 17:7,11-14; Mark 10:17,21
- A particular group of people?
e.g. Malachi 1:1; 3:6-10; Isaiah 6:8-11
- People living at a particular time?
e.g. Genesis 17:9-14; Galatians 6:12-15
- People living in particular circumstances?
e.g. Jeremiah 18:5-17; Ezekiel 33:11-20; Revelation 2:4-7

3rd RULE: DETERMINE THE EMPHASIS IN THE BIBLE PASSAGE

Often the emphasis in a Bible passage lies on something specific as a teaching, a command, a historical description, a promise or a prophecy. Determine where the emphasis lies.

Ask yourself: Does the emphasis in the Bible passage lie:

- on teaching a doctrine?
- on commanding an action?
- on relating a historical event?
- on making a promise or prophecy?

1. If the emphasis in the Bible passage is on teaching a doctrine, then this teaching is meant for you and you *must* believe it.

For example. In John 14:6 the emphasis lies on teaching a doctrine. Formulate the doctrine by especially noting the nouns: “I (Jesus)”, “the way”, “the truth”, “the life”, “no one” and “the Father”.

The teaching that you must believe is: “Jesus is the only way to God the Father!”

2. If the emphasis in the Bible passage is on commanding an action, then this command is meant for you and you *must* obey it.

Example. In John 13:34-35 the emphasis lies on commanding an action. Formulate the action by especially noting the verbs: “*love* one another”, “as I have *loved* you”, “all men will *know*”, “you *are* my disciples”.

The command that you must obey is: “Christians must love one another as Jesus Christ loved them”.

All the commandments (laws) with respect to the ceremonial law in the Old Testament: the laws with respect to the priests, the temple, the festivals (Leviticus 23) and the sacrifices, etc. applied only to God’s people *before* the first coming of Jesus Christ and may not be re-introduced into the New Testament Church!

3. If the emphasis is on relating a historical event, then you must first determine whether it is a good or a bad example. A good example *may* be followed, but a bad example *must not* be followed.

Example. The historical example in 1 Corinthians 10:6-11 is bad, but the historical example in 1 Corinthians 10:23–11:1 is good.

The bad example that you must not follow (that is forbidden) is: “Christians must not behave like idolaters in pagan revelry and sexual immorality.” And the good example that you may follow (that is permitted) is: “Christians may eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience.”

Example. In Acts 17:11 the emphasis in the Bible passage lies on relating an historical event and the example is a good one. Therefore Christians *may* follow the good example of the Bereans and study the Bible every day. But Christians may not demand from other Christians that they must study the Bible every day! (cf. rule 4). (Only when a particular good example is also supported by a clear teaching or command in another part of the Bible, you may treat that example as a teaching or command.)

4. If the emphasis in the Bible passage is on a promise or a prophecy, then you must first determine to whom it is addressed, whether there are conditions attached to it and whether it has been fulfilled or not.

➤ *Is the promise or prophecy directed to a specific person or specific group of people?*

If yes, to whom? E.g. in Genesis 22:15-18 God makes a promise to Abraham and his descendants. His descendants is here not the Jewish nation (Romans 9:6), but first of all Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:16) and then all people who believed in the Messiah during the Old Testament period and all people who believed in Jesus Christ during the New Testament period (Galatians 3:6-9; Romans 4:9-17).

➤ *Are there conditions attached to the promise or prophecy?*
If yes, which? E.g. in Jeremiah 18:5-17 and in Ezekiel chapter 18 the condition is sincere remorse and repentance.

➤ *Has the promise or prophecy been fulfilled?*
If yes, how? What does the New Testament teach about this promise or prophecy? E.g. the promise concerning the land and the number of descendants of Israel (Genesis 15:18 and 22:17) has already been fulfilled (1 Kings 4:20-21) (cf. Joshua 23:14-16). And the New Testament teaches that after the first coming of Jesus Christ there is no longer any difference between Jew and Gentile and also that only sincere believers in Jesus Christ from all nations belong to God's people (Matthew 8:11-12; 21:42-44; Romans 10:12-13; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:26-29; Galatians 6:14-16; Ephesians 2:11-22; 3:2-6; 1 Peter 2:9-10).

➤ *Is this promise or prophecy explained in the New Testament revelation?*
E.g. Isaiah 7:14-16 is explained in Matthew 1:23!

4th RULE: DETERMINE WHETHER THE HISTORY IN THE BIBLE PASSAGE IS NORMATIVE OR NOT

1. Human historical events and examples in the Bible that are *not explained or evaluated* are never normative or authoritative, unless they are expressions of normative teachings and commands elsewhere in the Bible

'Normative' means that something functions as a rule for Christian faith (doctrine) and behaviour (ethics). It means that a norm has been established to which man must adhere.

Human historical events and examples in the Bible show how people in history responded to God's prohibitions, commands and teachings – what they believed and how they behaved in history – sometimes in accordance with God's will and sometimes against God's will! Because these human historical events and examples in the Bible are usually related or described without any explanation or evaluation, they are not normative for Christian faith and behaviour unless the Bible in another place teaches this doctrine or commands this behaviour!

When these human historical events are expressions of sinful human culture they *must not* be followed. When they are expressions of acceptable human culture, they *may* be followed. And when they are expressions of the culture of the kingdom of God, they *must* be followed.

Examples of human historical events that are not normative (a rule for Christians): to kneel when you pray (Ephesians 3:14-15), to fast for 40 days (Matthew 4:2) or fast twice a week (Luke 18:12), or to preach the gospel only where Christ was not yet known (Romans 15:20). It is also not normative to pray early in the morning (Mark 1:35), to travel and preach (Mark 1:39), to touch a leper (Mark 1:41), to say to a paralytic, "Get up and walk" (Mark 2:9-12), to appoint twelve apostles (Mark 3:13-15), to teach in parables (Mark 4:2,34) or to rebuke a windstorm (Mark 4:39).

While the *teaching* of Jesus Christ with regard to prayer is normative, his *unevaluated example* in prayer is not normative. The teaching of Jesus Christ that Christians ought to pray in their rooms and not keep on muttering like the pagans (Matthew 6:5-8) is normative and applies as a rule or teaching for Christians in all ages and in all countries. But the *example* of Jesus Christ with regard to prayer, that he used to pray very early in the mornings in a lonely place (Mark 1:35), is not explained or evaluated anywhere in the Bible and is therefore not normative for Christians! Christians *may* follow this good example of Jesus Christ, but *may not* enforce this practice onto other Christians!

2. Human historical events in the Bible that are examples of clear teachings and commands in the Bible may be regarded as normative

Example of a human historical event that is normative.
Joseph did not revenge himself on his brothers (Genesis 45:5; 50:20-21). This is a very good example of human behaviour and *may* be followed. But because elsewhere the Bible teaches and commands that people may not revenge themselves, Christians *must* follow the example of Joseph. Jesus Christ not only left Christians an example of submitting to suffering without retaliation, but also *called* Christians to follow in his footsteps (1 Peter 2:21-23). And Paul *commanded* Christians not to take revenge (Romans 12:17-21). Thus these historical examples of Joseph and Jesus are normative.

3. Human historical events or examples in the Bible that are explained or evaluated may be regarded as normative. They become general teachings.

Examples of bad human historical events that are normative (they must be avoided).

The historical event

Examples of bad historical events: The Bible relates Israel's evil behaviour: serving idols (Exodus 32:6), committing adultery (Numbers 25:1-5), defying God (Numbers 21:5-6) and rebelling against God (Numbers 14:36-37). The result was that God scattered their dead bodies across the desert.

The evaluation

Because these bad historical events are evaluated ('God was not pleased with most Israelites'), Paul derives a general principle from these historical events: 'These things (historical events) occurred as examples and as warnings for Christians not to set their hearts on evil things' (1 Corinthians 10:6,11).

The teaching

The general teaching is: Christians *must* avoid all forms of evil described in the Bible and they must draw lessons from God's punishment of evil. These evaluated historical events are normative and apply to all people, whether Christian or not. On the basis of this Bible passage we learn that certain historical events related or described in the Bible (most often bad examples) have been recorded in the Bible as a warning to people that they *must not* do evil!

Examples of good human historical events that are normative (they must be followed).

The historical event

An example of a good historical event: Paul says that he tries to please everybody in every way in order to save as many as possible.

The evaluation

The evaluation of this historical event: Paul was following the example of Christ and was saving people. Therefore Paul derives a general principle from this behaviour: 'Give no offence (in permissible matters as food and drink) to Jews, Greeks or the Church of God (Christians); do not cause anyone to stumble; but seek to please them instead, so that they may be saved' (1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1).

The teaching

The general teaching is: Christians *must* behave in such a way that other people may be saved. This example is normative and applies to all Christians. On the basis of this Bible passage we learn that Christians *must* follow the good example of righteous people when their behaviour reflects the will of God and when they are following the example of Christ.

Historical event

Another historical event that is evaluated in the Bible is that the churches in Macedonia and Achaia made a collection for the poor in Jerusalem (Romans 15:26-27).

The evaluation

Paul evaluates this event and derives a general teaching from it: "If the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings."

The teaching

The general teaching is: Christians *must* share their spiritual and material blessings with one another (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:13; Galatians 6:6).

4. Divine salvation history in the Bible is always normative. Humans must believe it and must submit to it

God speaks and acts in creation and in human history in order to save his people and to judge others (study 5). Every word and act of God in the Bible is part of his eternal decree and is revealed within time in salvation history. God desires everyone to know and to submit to him and to his plan.

But God's acts in salvation history are unique and cannot be followed by man. Man can only submit to them.

Examples of God's salvation history:

God created the universe and earth and man. Only God can create!

God saves and judges in an absolute sense. Only God can save people from their sins and the consequences of their sins and only God judges people who do not submit to him.

God revealed himself and his plan. Only the God of the Bible revealed himself and his plan in which he saves and judges people. God's revelation of himself and his plan, the salvation of his people and his judgements within history are unique and cannot be emulated by man.

God revealed himself in creation (Romans 1:19-20; 2:15), through the Old Testament prophets (Hebrews 1:1-2), in Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:15,19) and through the teachings of the apostles about Jesus Christ (John 16:13-15). God saves people only through Jesus Christ (John 14:6). And God executes his judgements only through Jesus Christ (John 5:22). All people must submit to Jesus Christ (cf. Isaiah 45:21-23; Philippians 2:9-11)!

5th RULE: DETERMINE WHETHER THE CULTURE IN THE BIBLE PASSAGE IS NORMATIVE OR NOT

1. Human culture *described* in whatever historical period in the Bible is never normative or authoritative. If it is acceptable to God, it may be followed. But if it is reprehensible to God, it must not be followed!

Almost all human culture in the Bible is explained or evaluated, commanded, prohibited or taught.

The culture of a people consists of their beliefs, values, customs, traditions, behaviour and institutions in a certain period of history. These descriptions of human culture are never normative, unless they are taught or commanded in another place in the Bible.

Thus, while the Bible *only describes* the sinful culture of the world, it *teaches (commands)* the righteous culture of the kingdom of God!

In the Bible God *describes and unmasks* the false teachings and godless behaviour of people in world history and in other religions. These historical descriptions of human cultures (i.e. what people believed and how they behaved) in biblical times are never normative.

These descriptions of human culture in the Bible may either be acceptable or reprehensible to God. The Bible contains historical descriptions of good (acceptable) and also of bad (sinful, reprehensible) aspects of human culture in the times of the Bible.

Examples of good (acceptable) human culture that may be followed.

Composing new Christians songs, singing, making music with all kinds of musical instruments and even dancing as expressions of rejoicing in God were part of good human culture. God's people *may* follow this example and are

even encouraged in the Bible to do this (Psalm 149:1-5; 150:2-6).

Eating with hands (Mark 7:2), chopsticks or knife and fork is not forbidden in the Bible and this custom may be followed.

Teaching children in Sunday Schools (cf. Mark 10:13-16) or youth in Youth Clubs is also not forbidden in the Bible and this may also be done.

Washing the feet of guests (John 13:4-5) was not only a good cultural habit, but was also commanded in the Bible (John 13:14-15). It means: Christians *must* serve where other people are unwilling or unable to serve.

2. Human culture *prohibited* in the Bible is always normative and authoritative! It must not be followed!

The sinful worldly culture described within the history of the Bible is explicitly prohibited!

Examples of bad (reprehensible) human culture that must not be followed.

David had more than one wife (2 Samuel 5:13; cf. Genesis 2:24). Absalom took revenge and killed his brother Amnon (2 Samuel 13:22,32; cf. Romans 12:19). These examples are recorded in the Bible, but they are definitely not normative, because they are prohibited in other parts of the Bible! These examples *must not* be followed.

Becoming a false prophet that teaches false doctrines is reprehensible (Jeremiah chapter 23). Following the detestable practices of the non-Christian nations is reprehensible (Deuteronomy 18:9-13): religious murders, divination, sorcery, interpreting omens, witchcraft, casting spells, visiting mediums and spiritists, consulting the dead, etc. Practising all kinds of sexual immorality is reprehensible (Leviticus 18:6,20,22,23; Romans 1:24-27): incest, adultery, homosexual and lesbian practices and bestiality. Gossips, slanderers, arrogant and boastful people are reprehensible (Romans 1:29-30). Faithless, heartless and ruthless people are reprehensible (Romans 1:31-31). These examples *must not* be followed.

Having more than one wife at the same time is forbidden in the Bible (Matthew 19:3-6). Divorce without one of the four biblical reasons for divorce (sexual immorality, spiritual immorality, violence and mixed marriages) is reprehensible (Malachi 2:14-16; Matthew 5:32; Mark 10:11-12; 1 Corinthians 7:10-15). Polygamy and sexual immorality *must not* be followed.

3. Human culture *commanded or taught* in the Bible is always normative and authoritative! It must be obeyed!

Commands, prohibitions and teachings in the Bible (correctly interpreted) reveal God's will with respect to what everyone in the world in all cultures and in all history *must believe* and how they *must behave*! They express the norms of the kingdom of God culture and are always normative or authoritative, unless the Bible limits a particular prohibition, command or teaching elsewhere in the Bible.

The culture of the kingdom of God consists of the teachings and the commandments and prohibitions in the Bible (correctly interpreted). It consists of all the truths in the Bible which people *must* believe, what values they *must* hold and how they *must* behave at all times and in all places on earth! The culture of the kingdom of God is always (in every period of history) and everywhere (in every country in the world) normative and authoritative! It teaches and commands people throughout history and everywhere in the world to what they *must* be changed or transformed and how they *must* live.

The culture of the kingdom of God demands the change (transformation) of all sinful human cultural aspects in every human culture in the world. God commands and teaches in the Bible which aspects in the culture of every group of people or any individual in the world must change in order to become like the culture of the kingdom of God!

Ask yourself: "Does this Bible passage describe aspects of the sinful human culture in the world in a particular period of time? Or does it describe aspects of the always holy and righteous culture of the kingdom of God?"

Note. The ceremonial laws during the Old Testament period have been fulfilled, cancelled and abrogated (Matthew 5:17; Colossians 2:14, Ephesians 2:15) and are therefore no longer normative during the New Testament period.

Important normative teachings in the Bible

The following teachings are all normative, because they are clear teachings of God with respect to marriage, sex, family, church, government and court cases in the kingdom of God.

The teachings of the prophet Malachi (Malachi 2:14-16), of Jesus Christ (Matthew 19:3-9) and of the apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 7:1-16) with regard to Christian marriage and divorce are normative. The teachings of Moses, Paul and the writer to the Hebrews with regard to sexual immortality are normative (Leviticus 18:3-6,20,22-23; Romans

1:24-27; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8; Hebrews 13:4).

The teachings of Paul and Peter with regard to the responsibilities of husbands, wives and children in the family are normative (Ephesians 5:22-33; Colossians 3:18-21; Titus 2:4; 1 Peter 3:1-7).

The teachings of Paul and Peter with respect to the church and its leaders (elders) are normative (Acts 20:17,28; Ephesians 4:1-16; 1 Timothy 3:1-15; 5:17-22; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-7).

The teachings of Paul with respect to the responsibilities of men and women within the official meetings of the church are normative (1 Corinthians 14:26-40; 1 Timothy 2:8-15).

The teachings of Jesus, Paul and Peter with respect to the government of a country are normative (Matthew 22:21; Acts 4:19-20; 5:29; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17).

The teachings of Moses and Paul with respect to court cases are normative (Deuteronomy 16:18-20; 1 Corinthians 5:9-6:11).

4. The culture of the kingdom of God is always normative and authoritative. It must be obeyed! God's purpose is to create a special people of God living in the world according to the culture of the kingdom of God!

It is God's explicit purpose, not only to change (transform) man, but also his culture! Every sinful aspect of every human culture on earth must be changed (transformed) into the culture of the kingdom of God!

Human cultures are constantly evaluated in the Bible. It is God's purpose to expose all human cultures to the light of the culture of the kingdom of God so that all human cultures would become more and more like the culture of the kingdom of God! God's purpose is to create a special people of God possessing the culture of the kingdom of God! God is preparing Christians on earth to inherit the kingdom of God in its final phase (Matthew 25:35; Revelation 11:15).

Christians must therefore regard all the prohibitions, commands and teachings in the Bible with regard to how the cultures in the world *must* change into becoming the culture of the kingdom of God as normative, not only for Christians, but normative for all people in the world and throughout the whole history of the world, because the God of the Bible is not only the God of Christians, but also the God of all non-Christians, whether they acknowledge this or not!

It is God's purpose "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Ephesians 1:10; cf. Philippians 2:9-11)!