

Chapter 3

The Forgotten Purpose of Truth: Our Foundation of Biblical Hermeneutics

My Christian walk began at the age of 21. The Lord worked through the janitor of a local church, along with the lifestyle example of a few others, to introduce me to a personal relationship with God. I was blessed to begin my journey with Christ as a young adult. But almost two decades later, while serving in local church ministry myself, I began to realize that I had traveled only a short distance in my journey toward an intimate relationship with the Lord. Thankfully, He began to change all of that.

While preparing a message from the seventeenth chapter of Luke, an encounter with the Lord redefined my perspective on life and ministry. In a few short moments of meditating over this passage, my perspective on preaching, teaching, Bible study, and the Christian life itself was forever changed.

It was a Tuesday. I was in my study, feeling grateful for a few hours of uninterrupted time to get ahead on the next week's message. After my typical reading and reflection on the text, I began scribbling a few tentative thoughts for a teaching outline.

Obey the Bible was my first handwritten entry on an otherwise blank notepad. I interpreted Christ's interaction with the ten lepers as a reminder for us to obey God's commands. I noted that as the lepers approached Christ with the words, Master, have pity on us, He responded with a command they were to obey: Go, show yourselves to the priests (Luke 17:13, 14). Old Testament law spoke of cleansing from lep-

rosy and required these men to show themselves to the priest in order to be declared ceremonially clean (Leviticus 14:2). Just as Christ commanded the lepers to obey the Levitical law, there was little uncertainty in my mind that this passage was our reminder to obey biblical laws.

Next, I scribbled the words, *Exercise Faith* on my notepad. By reading and interpreting the text, I knew that the lepers were called upon to exercise faith as they traveled back to Jerusalem. Their healing was not immediate; Scripture tells us, *As they went, they were cleansed* (Luke 17:14). I gleaned from this the truth that God also wants us, as His children, to exercise faith in His Word. After all, God declared that without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6), and that faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ (Romans 10:17).

As I continued to reflect upon the Savior's interaction with the one leper who returned to express his gratitude, the emotion of the passage began to impact my heart. After the leper threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him, Christ asked a series of remarkable questions. My eyes were fixated on the red letters of my Bible: *Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner* (Luke 17:17, 18)?

For the first time, the Lord's reaction seemed important to me. Did He not know whether the other lepers were cleansed? Was Christ really questioning the whereabouts of those nine? Certainly not He is the omniscient One. Then why did He ask such questions? The Spirit began to move in my heart as sadness overwhelmed me. Jesus was not asking these questions because He did not know the answers. This was a brokenhearted Savior expressing disappointment because of the apparent lack of gratitude of the nine. This was Christ revealing His hurt. This was Jesus expressing His pain.

Tears began to fill my eyes. Sadness moved over my heart. Why was I crying? Where was this sadness coming from? After a few moments of

reflection, I realized that I was actually hurting for Jesus. I was living out a measure of what the apostle Paul spoke of in Philippians: the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings (Philippians 3:10).

The contrast was remarkable: I had engaged in careful exegesis of this passage of Scripture many times and preached several effective sermons on the text before. But on this day, it was as if God said, David, you know a lot about my Son's teaching. You know a lot about my Son's preaching. But would it be all right if I helped you get to know Him in a deeper way? I would like to help you know Him and His sufferings, in order to deepen your love for Him and for others.

He wants to make the pages of Scripture come alive and lead you on a journey toward a loving, deeply intimate relationship with God.

On that day, my relationship with Christ grew more intimate; my love for Him was deepened and enriched. Mercifully, God opened my heart to a new way of approaching His Word.

Since that day, I have come to believe that the Spirit of God wants to draw each of us into this same sensitivity for the Christ of the Bible. He wants to soften your heart with this same tenderness for Jesus and then revolutionize how you read, study, and teach His Word. He wants to make the pages of Scripture come alive and lead you on a journey toward a loving, deeply intimate relationship with God.

Tragically, most Christians would say they desire this close relationship with the Lord. Some would even say they are pursuing it. But this kind of deep, intimate relationship eludes many of us. We come to salvation, begin our relationship with the Lord, and learn to walk in His Spirit, but never travel very far down the road toward intimacy and closeness with Him. We may diligently study the Bible, pray faithfully, and even convey His truths to others, yet neglect to continue this journey toward intimacy. How can this be?

THE FORGOTTEN PURPOSE OF TRUTH

We all begin our relationship with God by declaring ourselves to be separated from God and in need of a Savior. From that moment, we begin our walk with Christ. Thankfully, God also provides several avenues through which we can continue our growth and pursuit of Christlikeness. We have the opportunity to approach God through prayer. We have the provision of fellowship with the body of Christ His church. We can relate to God

through corporate worship. Additionally, God has given us His Word so that we might come to know Him and His desires for our life and ministry.

It is this forgotten purpose that can serve His longing to restore relevance to the 21st century church.

It is to this provision of Scripture that we want to give our focus. Could it be that, in our efforts to grow and mature in Christ, we are not doing everything we

are supposed to be doing with the Bible? Could it be that, even in our best attempts at discerning God's truth and working to apply it, we have not done all that we need to do with Scripture? Could we have missed a

To claim there is any way to salvation other than Jesus is error,

Acts 4:12



Rational Purpose of Truth

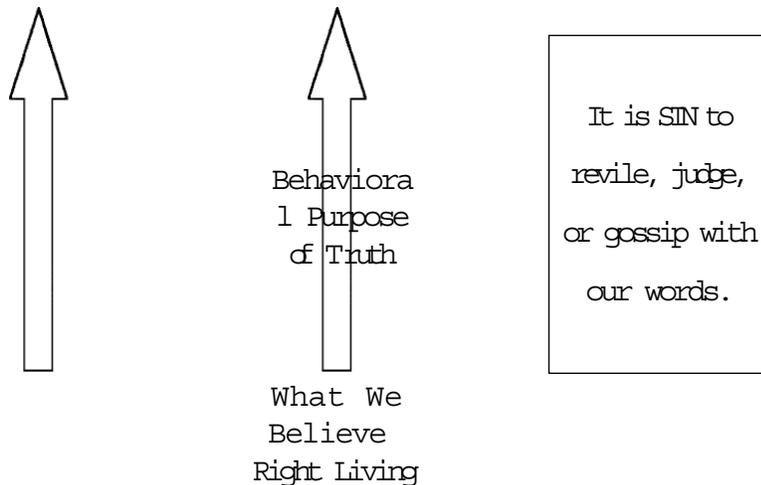
What We Believe Right



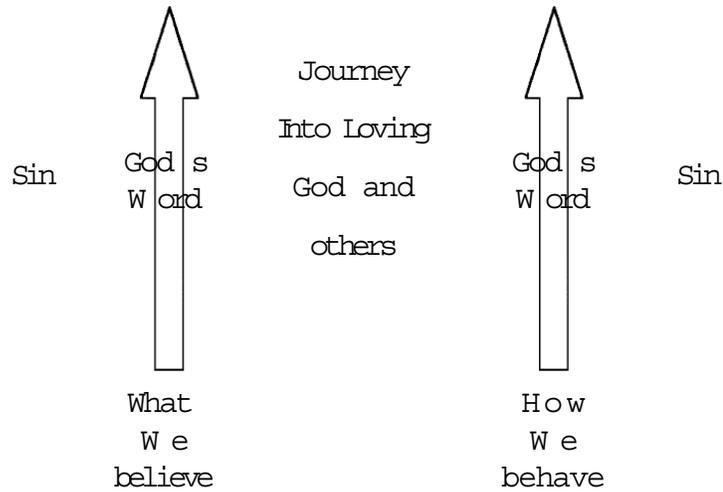
The Forgotten Purpose of Truth: Our Foundation of Biblical

Most of us are also acquainted with the behavioral purpose of God's truth. We look to God's Word to tell us how to live our lives. We know that the Bible gives us commands and principles for how to live a life that is pleasing to God and in harmony with one another. Ephesians 4:29 speaks of not letting any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth (reproof), but only what is helpful for building others up (correction). Therefore, to revile, judge, or gossip with our words is to fall outside of the boundary of right living; these are sin. The diagram below shows us

Ephesians 4:29



While these two purposes of truth are critical for life and ministry, they are not sufficient in themselves. Consider the third diagram below as a way to summarize our representation of God's truth. God's Word gives us boundaries for our life and ministry. The Bible defines the limits of sound doctrine and clearly sets the boundaries for what we are to believe. God's Word also gives us boundaries for how we are to live our life and outlines how we should behave. Yet we must see that these are boundaries given by God in order to direct our journey toward a relationship with Him and



Many of us, though, get sidetracked on this journey toward a deep, intimate relationship with God. We carefully look to Scripture in order to tell us what to believe and how we should behave, but we end up simply veering toward

Week by week, we leave church knowing what to believe and how to behave, but we never take the journey into a deeper relationship with the God of the Bible.

one curb or the other, and miss the opportunity to more deeply know the God of the Bible. As a result, our lives may suffer from a lack of significance and diminished, eternal impact for the cause of Christ. Our ministries may be void of relevance and demonstrable impact because week by week we leave church knowing what to believe and how to behave, but we never take the journey

into a deeper relationship with the God of the Bible. Tragically, many of us have been unable to consistently experience the relational purpose of truth. As we will elaborate in the section to follow, the relational purpose of truth is this: God's Word was written so that we might have a loving, intimate relationship with the One who wrote it, as well as with those He loves.

CONFIRMATIONS OF THE RELATIONAL PURPOSE OF TRUTH

The Lord used my experience of suffering with Jesus over the ungratefulness of the nine lepers to challenge the way I interpreted Scripture. My general guidelines for interpreting Scripture had been to ask questions like, What does the passage say? What does it mean? What does it mean to me? My experience with Christ in Luke 17 seemed to argue that Scripture was most certainly given to us in order to provide us with right doctrine and instruction for right behavior, but there was more. Could it be that it was also given in order to lead us into loving relationships with God and other people? As I looked carefully through Scripture, I discovered countless confirmations of this relational purpose of truth.

Confirmation From the Old Testament

When challenged to identify the key truth of the Old Testament, many scholars would cite Micah 6:8: What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. In these few words, we find concise instructions for relating to both God and other people. This verse summarizes all of Old Testament Scripture with relational commands walk humbly with the Lord, and treat others with justice and compassion.

I was amazed to discover that the Old Testament law also confirms God's relational purpose of truth. We may have to look a little deeper, but even within the old covenant, we can see a God who wants to draw His people into a loving relationship with Him and one another.

We all know that church curricula and teachers of the Word regularly emphasize the importance of the Ten Commandments. From preschool classes to adult Bible Studies, we frequently revisit these instructions that are so central to the Old Testament. Effective teachers explain the context in which the commandments were given, challenge us to pursue the behavioral lifestyle that the commandments exhort, and speak of the truthful insights that the commandments provide into God's character and holiness. But when we study the Ten Commandments and do not experience the heart of the compassionate Father who gave us those commandments, we cannot fully see the God who is love. We miss the rela-



Pause and Reflect

Sit quietly before the Lord, and consider how He has given you certain commandments for your good. He has articulated specific thou shalt nots that will keep you from harm. He loves you and does not want to see you hurt. What does it do to your heart to consider His care?

As I consider the Lord's care for my good, my heart is touched with _____.

Express your feelings with God. Tell the Lord about your gratefulness, humility, love, or joy. Offer your heart felt prayers to Him.

As we approach any passage of Scripture, we must not only look at the rational meaning of the text and extract behavioral applications from the text. We must always ask ourselves: What is revealed in the text about the character, person, and heart of God? We must then allow His Spirit to lead us into a heart felt response. This relational perspective will be critical to developing a more intimate relationship with the One who is Truth.

That's what a hurting world needs to see: A model of God's Word in action, a body of believers experiencing God's Book and loving God and one another. That is relevance.

Confirmation From the 1st Century Church
 Confirmation of the relational purpose of truth is also found in early church history. No one who reads the New Testament can miss the amazing impact and immediate relevance of the 1st century church. The Book of Acts

clearly chronicles how the Holy Spirit enabled these believers to change their world for Christ. What could they have been doing differently? What did they know that the 21st century church may be missing?

We can say with certainty that part of the early church's success was due to its emphasis on the application of truth. They taught that the truths of God's Word were to be experienced in our attitudes and actions. The apostle John admonished, "Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:18). Truth was to be both believed and lived out. The members of the early church learned to demonstrate this identity of love as they became passionately committed to loving Jesus and one another. They lived out Christ's prediction from the upper room: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). Paul continued to affirm this relational purpose of God's Word when he wrote to Timothy, "The goal of our instruction is love" (1 Timothy 1:5 NASB). Finally, Peter affirmed the scattered saints of the 1st century because they had purified themselves by obeying the truth (they believed and behaved rightly) and developed a sincere love of the brethren, but then encouraged them to do more: "Love one another deeply, from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22).

The 21st century church must likewise take a firm stand for the truth. We must proclaim that Scripture is the authoritative, absolute truth of God. But we must go further. We can have Bible-believing, Bible-teaching churches that are still irrelevant to the needs of people. If we misapply God's Word by appealing only to the rational mind, hearers of the Word may leave unaffected or even turned off by the truths we hold so dear. When we experience scriptural truth in our relationships with God and others, we put God's love into action. That is what a hurting world needs to see: a model of God's Word in action, a body of believers experiencing God's Book and loving God and one another. That is relevance.



An Experience With God's Son

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings (Philippians 3:10).

Let us revisit the story of the ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19). Consider the scene: as Jesus and His disciples approach a village on their way to Jerusalem, a ragged band of men begins to call out to them. They shout their request from afar. You cannot see their faces because they have grown accustomed to hiding in shame. Days or even years of rejection have made them cower behind their cloaks. On this day, however, the rumors of a teacher who can bring healing to the sick have made the men unusually bold. Out of desperation, they call out, Jesus, Master, have pity on us!

Scripture tells us that when Jesus saw the men, He gave an immediate response. The Savior took one look at the torn flesh and diseased bodies. He saw the rejection and condemnation they had suffered, the sadness of their hearts as they were forced to leave family members and friends. And as soon as the Savior saw these men, He was driven to action. He was moved with compassion, and guaranteed their healing with the words, Go, show yourselves to the priests.

Scripture records that as the men walked toward the temple, they were cleansed. Can you picture the faces of the men as they approach the city? Perhaps one man looks down and watches as the flesh is restored to his arms. Another stops and stares with amazement at the face of his friend as he sees him whole and healthy for the very first time. Their steps quicken as they remember a wife at home alone, a child whom they have never seen, or a friend who is dearly missed. They hurry

toward the temple, knowing that the priest's blessing is the only thing that stands in the way of restoring these relationships that they have missed so much.

Pause now and consider the next scene of the story. Jesus has moved further down the road toward Jerusalem. The ten lepers have been sent ahead to show themselves to the priest. But as Jesus and the disciples make the turn in the road toward the city, they find that one of the lepers has doubled back. He runs to Jesus and throws himself at the Savior's feet. Tears of joy stream down his face. He is out of breath, yet his words are very clear: Thank You! Thank You! Praise You!

The words of appreciation and praise still hang in the air, but words have now been replaced with quiet tears. The man still kneels before Jesus, just weeping. If we look carefully, we might notice that Jesus is peculiarly still. His face is saddened. His expression is grieved. Christ kneels in front of the man, grasping his shoulders. We hear pain in the Savior's voice as He asks, Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?

Pause now and reflect on Christ's questions for the leper. What do they seem to suggest is in the heart of Jesus?

Jesus seems to be experiencing _____.

What does it do to your heart to reflect on the pain that Christ experienced?

As I consider how Jesus was saddened and disappointed, my heart is moved with _____.

Pause and pray a prayer of care and concern for Christ. Tell Him how it makes you feel to know of His hurt.

Confirmation From Christ: Re-hanging the Mirror of God's Word

James 1:23, 24 tells us, "Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it he will be blessed in what he does."

Therefore, we can imagine that God's Word is like a mirror that hangs on a wall in our home. We can look into this mirror and see how closely we resemble Jesus. We can gaze into the glass and see a reflection of God's glory as the Spirit works to transform us into the likeness of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Just as the mirrors in our home hang from nails, God's mirror (the Bible) must hang upon something as well. In dramatic fashion, while answering a question concerning which commandment was greatest, Christ revealed that God's Word actually hangs upon two commandments: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. . . . Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:37-40). Christ said that all of Scripture hangs, depends, or must be considered in relation to the way we love God and one another. Every book of the Bible, every command and scriptural principle, hangs on the nails of loving God and loving one another.

The New Testament reveals that God intends for us to look into the mirror of His Word and allow the Spirit to transform us into His image, thus bringing glory to God. Christ's answer to the Pharisee in the Gospel of Matthew expands that vision. Jesus' response reveals that it is not enough to simply know God's truth and study His commands, but that all of Scripture must be lived out in the context of loving relationships with God and one another.

Imagine what might happen if you removed the nail that holds a mirror on the wall of your home. That mirror would fall and shatter into pieces as it hit the floor. If you picked up one of the pieces that fell to the ground, would you still have a mirror? Yes. But could you see everything as clearly as before? No. Without the nail supporting the mirror, your view would be distorted. Without the nail, you would not be able to see the image as a whole.

It is not enough to simply know God's truth and study His commands; all of Scripture must be lived out in the context of loving relationships with God and one another.

The Pharisees seem to have had a mirror that had fallen to the ground. They seem to have only been able to see certain pieces of God's truth. They were masters at picking up one piece of God's mirror and, with an incomplete and distorted view, looking for others who were not living up to that piece. Their knowledge of Scripture consistently contrasted with the testimony of their lives, provoking anger and rebuke from the Lord. Jesus revealed the disparity between the Pharisees' knowledge and their relationship when He said, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life (John 5:39, 40). These religious leaders were the most learned biblical scholars of their day, and had spent years in the pursuit of knowledge of the Scriptures, but they missed the chance to experience a deepened love relationship with the One who is Truth and those He loves.

On one occasion, Scripture tells us that Jesus and His disciples were passing through the grain fields, and the disciples began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees asked the Lord, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath (Mark 2:24)?" The religious leaders were looking for someone who was not living out the command to keep the Sabbath holy (see Exodus 20:8-10). Did God command that we observe

the Sabbath and give honor to the Lord? Yes. Were the Pharisees correct in their study and knowledge of this truth? Yes. They understood the rational purpose of truth and embraced the behavioral purpose of truth, but they missed the overarching relational purpose of truth. They neglected to see that the command to keep the Sabbath must be interpreted in the context of loving God and loving others.

Jesus responded to the Pharisees by recounting the story of King David and his men. Christ reminded the Pharisees that when David and his men entered the house of God, they ate the consecrated bread because they were hungry (Matthew 12:3-8). Jesus re-hung the Sabbath requirements back on the nail of Great Commandment love as He said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).

The New Testament contains many other instances of Christ confirming the relational purpose of truth. In Jesus' prayer for His disciples, He asks the Father to "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). This prayer of Jesus reveals that God's Word consecrates us and sets us apart for a particular purpose. But what is that purpose? The last verse of Christ's lengthy prayer gives insight:

We may be arming saints with a small piece of God's truth and sending them out into the community to look for

that the love you have for me may be in them (v. 26). We are set apart in order to experience and express Christlike love.

Another confirmation of the relational purpose of truth is found in Christ's words in John 8:32 to the Jews who

had come to believe in Him: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. If God's truth is supposed to set us free, what is it that we are supposed to do in our freedom? Galatians 5:13 provides this insight: "You my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather, serve one another in love."

Finally, Christ confirmed the relational purpose of truth as He interacted with other people. His responses to Zacchaeus, the woman at the well, and the man born blind all bear witness to a Savior who did not just live out the letter of the Law, but who re-hung that law upon the nail of loving God and loving others. But there is perhaps no greater example of Christ's commitment to a relational purpose of truth than His interaction with the woman caught in adultery.

Jesus offered forgiveness and a new start to this woman, even as the religious leaders prepared to stone her. The Pharisees held up the truth of the Law: Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say? (John 8:4). The Pharisees, armed with this piece of Scripture, were ready to pass judgment and carry out the swift execution the Law demanded. Did Christ know the truth of Scripture? Yes. Did He embrace and agree with it? Certainly. But Jesus did something different with that truth. He compassionately said to the woman, Neither do I condemn you, but He added, Go now and leave your life of sin (v.11). Christ showed His love for this woman who had been scarred by sin as He knelt beside her on the ground. Jesus demonstrated His lavish grace, offering protection and security. Then, and only then, did He address her behavior. Only after Christ had demonstrated His love for the woman did He address her sinful acts. Only after He had shown compassion and mercy did He speak of her failure. We cannot help but conclude that this woman was moved with gratefulness and loving obedience.

The church of the 21st century must heed the example of Christ. We must not only dedicate ourselves to scriptural knowledge and purity of lifestyle; we must learn to hang all of Scripture on the Great Commandment loving God and one another. We must do more than memorize Bible verses; we must live them out with God and other people. We must do more than arm ourselves with biblical knowledge and pass that knowledge onto others; we must model it and live it out in loving relationships. When we

equip people with the knowledge of truth, but fail to show them the relational purpose of truth, we may promote a Pharisaical perspective. Week by week, we may be arming saints with a small piece of God's truth and sending them out into the community to look for people who are violating it.

Has the church of the 21st century lost the nail that should be holding the mirror of God's Word? Have we lost sight of the two commandments that all other aspects of God's Word hang upon? Could this explain why there is so much knowledge of God's Word, yet so few people who are actually living it out? Could this explain why so many Christians know the truth, yet too frequently find themselves in the same moral and ethical failures as those without a relationship with Christ? Could this have any relation to the alarming fact that Christian marriages fail as frequently as any others? Could this be the reason that William Hendricks, author of *Exit Interviews: Revealing Stories of Why People Are Leaving the Church*, listed the number-one reason that people leave the church as follows:

People no longer evaluate Christianity on the basis of whether it is true, but how it is true in their own lives. The question today is not whether God exists, but what difference does God make. People are not merely searching for truth they are searching for how truth can be applied to their lives.

The church of the 21st century must re-examine what we are doing with Scripture. We must reclaim the forgotten purpose of truth because when we only emphasize fragments of God's truth, we lose relevance and impact in a hurting world. In order to be effective in our efforts to reach the world for Christ, we have to move beyond giving intellectual assent to the Bible, debating over rational beliefs, or assessing standards of behavior, and begin to experience the Word with God and one another.

PAINFUL RESULTS OF MISSING THE RELATIONAL PURPOSE OF TRUTH

Christians in every church and leaders of every denomination, movement, and para-church ministry must take steps to return to the foundation of loving God and loving others as we teach, preach, and study God's Word. If we continue to miss this relational purpose of truth, our churches and ministries will continue in their irrelevance and decline. Our personal lives will lack the vibrant relevance and passion that fulfills Christ's promise of exceeding abundance (John 10:10 KJV). We will become vulnerable to each of these painful results of missing the relational purpose of truth:

If the Relational Purpose of Truth Is Not Prioritized, Hearers of the Word May Become Proud.

The Pharisees only knew what Scripture said. They did not fully know the One who wrote it (5:39, 40). Their pursuit of knowledge without relationship produced pride and arrogance (Matthew 12:14).

First Corinthians 8:1-3 contrasts knowledge with love: Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God.

James 4:6 warns us about God's perspective on those who are proud, arrogant, or puffed up. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

My Personal Journey

After becoming a Christian as a young adult, I quickly began to develop friendships with other men who were interested in spiritual things. We sincerely wanted to know more of God's Word and were committed to our faith. During one particular Bible study, our group decided to begin a rigorous course of Scripture memory. We challenged one another to memorize large portions of the Bible, and even set up a system for holding each other accountable. As we would gather together for lunch or a cup of coffee, one of my friends would begin to recite his assigned text (the

entire tenth chapter of the Gospel of John, for example), and then look to another person to recite the following chapter. These memory challenges grew increasingly difficult, but we reveled in the challenge because we were taking our spiritual growth seriously. I was motivated in this effort because spiritual growth seemed certain if I could only hide the word of God in my heart.

As the months passed, several members of our accountability group dropped out. We began our second year with a dozen young men who were serious about their spiritual walk, but after a few weeks, our number had dwindled down to only three. The three of us would sit at the local coffee shop and share our latest insight from the original languages of Scripture, or recite the chapter or book that we had recently committed to memory. It was during this time that my heart grew increasingly proud. I looked around with an arrogant smile at the few of us who remained, and had pity on the others who could not measure up. The three of us found perverse pleasure in verses like Matthew 22:14: For many are called, but few are chosen (NASB). After all, we were among the chosen! Another of our favorite verses was Matthew 7:13: Broad is the road that leads to destruction. The way we saw it, those who had opted out of our group were on that road, while we, of course, were on the narrow road that leads to life!

In my pursuit of knowledge, I had missed the Person of the Bible. In my quest for spiritual maturity, the importance of a relationship with my brothers in Christ had gone unnoticed. Looking back, God's heart must have been broken by my pride and grieved by my arrogance.

If the Relational Purpose of Truth Is Not Prioritized, Hearers of the Word May Feel Condemned.

Matthew 12:7 If you had known what these words mean, I desire

mercy, not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the innocent. If we are not careful, we may adopt the right beliefs and look for opportunities to debate about those beliefs. Or we may claim the right truths of Scripture and, like the Pharisees, condemn people who are not living out those truths.

Luke 6:37 Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.

John 8:10 Jesus straightened up and asked her, Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? . . . Neither do I condemn you.

My Personal Journey

My own family members could testify to the importance of prioritizing the relational purpose of truth. Their testimony comes from years of my overly zealous commitment to right beliefs and right behaviors. You see, before becoming a Christian, I was very good at being lost in my sin. My lifestyle was sinful and corrupt, and I lived in a state of enthusiastic and blatant rebellion. When Christ came into my life, I put that same fanatical energy and eagerness into my newfound faith. The pendulum swung, and my family experienced the painful results of my misdirected intensity.

As I grew in my knowledge of God's Word and in the maturity of my Christian faith, living a life that was characterized by purity, obedience, and Christlikeness became paramount. In this particular season of my life, God's truth in 1 Thessalonians 5:22, Avoid every kind of evil, was foremost in my mind and heart. Unfortunately, like the Pharisees, I took that one piece of God's Word and started looking for evil in my home.

Predictably, evil was discovered. I found that my own daughter was listening to evil music. She had several albums by the Beatles, with songs like

Can't Buy Me Love and Yellow Submarine. They just had to be evil. Next, I discovered that even my wife was listening to evil music. Teresa's albums were clearly displayed near the record player. I had not heard the songs on those albums before and was definitely unaware that the albums contained no lyrics, only instrumental music. But surely that music was evil; the name Mantovani just sounded evil.

Upon making these discoveries, I decided that it was up to me to help my family obey the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:22; they were clearly not avoiding every kind of evil. So I broke those records. When my wife and children were out of the house one day, I smashed that evil music and threw the pieces in the garbage can. As I sat down to wait for my family, it seemed only fitting to prepare a brief sermon for them about the necessity of avoiding even the appearance of evil as a Christian.

I am not proud to admit any of this. My heart cringes at the memory of my wife and daughter's faces as I told them what I had done. They left the room quietly, not angered by my actions but obviously condemned. What my wife thought was beautiful, instrumental music had been labeled evil by her husband. What my daughter thought was fun, contemporary music, her dad had called evil. They both respectfully complied with my wishes, but I remember leaving the room that day puzzled by their lack of joy. My plan was to rid our home of evil, but they seemed to only feel my judgment.

If the Relational Purpose of Truth Is Not Prioritized, Irrelevance Will Increase.

Irrelevance increases when we learn more biblical truth, but never take the journey into a deeper relationship with God. Our loving relationship with the One who wrote the Book empowers us to live out the truths of the Book. Are we living out a genuine image of Christ, or do we have only a form of godliness (2 Timothy 3:5)?

Is there a sense of irrelevance about our lives and ministries? Have we been emphasizing trivial matters while missing the weightier provisions of the law (see example in Matthew 23:23-33)? Irrelevancy

increases when we leave church week after week knowing more and having been exhorted to obey more, but not having experienced deepened love for God and others.

We must allow God's Word to take root in us until what we proclaim and how we live are one and the same.

Irrelevance in Our Personal Lives

Many years ago, I took my first of several trips to the Holy Land. My wife and I were blessed to walk the streets of Jerusalem, stroll along the Sea of Galilee, and even pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. We have countless memories of the Lord strengthening our love for Him as we actually saw the places where He lived and died.

There is one memory, though, that is distinct from all the rest. Our tour group stayed at a contemporary, multi-story hotel in the city of Jerusalem, with all of the modern conveniences. The hotel itself was beautiful, but what I remember most are the unique features that we discovered on the Saturday of our visit. You see, if you walked into the restroom of this modern hotel in downtown Jerusalem on a Saturday, you would find toilet paper that had already been torn for you and paper towels that had already been taken out of the dispenser. You would find that all of the buttons in the elevators had been pushed for you. In fact, if you were staying on one of the top floors of this hotel and wanted to go down to the lobby, you would have to stop at every floor on the way down. Likewise, if you were in the lobby and wanted to go to your room, you would have to wait as the elevator stopped at every floor on the way up.

I discovered that these unique features of the hotel were reflections of a cultural effort to live out the Old Testament command to keep the Sabbath holy (Exodus 20:8-10). The toilet paper was torn so that you did not have to work on the Sabbath. The elevator buttons were already pushed because to push an elevator button would be to work on the Sabbath.

I could not get over how silly these traditions seemed. How could they be so concerned about trivial things like toilet paper and elevator buttons? I wondered. Yet as I returned from my trip to the Holy Land, the Spirit of God spoke to my heart: David, how often have you put enormous emphasis on trivial things? How often have you focused upon those things that do not really matter? The Lord humbled my heart concerning the irrelevance of much of my own preaching, teaching, and exhortation.

Irrelevance in Ministry

Pastor Newman was more animated and intense than usual during Sunday's message. His text was 1 Thessalonians 4:3: It is God's will . . . that you should avoid sexual immorality. The pastor knew that his topic was extremely relevant to his congregation at this time. He had recently learned that the son-in-law of Frank Johnson, one of his faithful members, had been caught in an extramarital affair.

Pastor Newman preached his sermon with conviction. He pointed out that fornication is one of the most heinous sins because it is a sin against one's own body. He gave powerful illustrations about the consequences of sexual sin, being careful to point out the certain availability of God's forgiveness, but also emphasizing the dreadful wages of disobeying God.

The congregation left that Sunday morning in a somber mood. They thanked their pastor for the powerful sermon. Thank you, Pastor. That was just what the people needed to hear. Even Frank Johnson left the church with a tear-stained face and appreciative heart.

The message from Pastor Newman was crystal clear that Sunday morning. The Word of God was declared with authority and conviction: sexual immorality is sin, and sin brings consequences. There was no doubt where the pastor stood on the issue. That is why everyone in the community was stunned when, less than three months later, Pastor Newman was arrested for soliciting a prostitute on the other side of town.

The Forgotten Purpose of Truth: Our Foundation of Biblical



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And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24).

Take a moment now to reflect on your own journey with God's Word. Consider your own tendencies to focus upon the rational purpose or behavioral purpose of His truth. Reflect on your own habits of emphasizing trivial matters or misrepresenting the character of God. Pause now and consider your responses to each of these statements below. Allow the Holy Spirit to impress you with any needed changes. Prayerfully consider which of these statements may be true for you:

I have sometimes overemphasized the importance of believing God's truth or agreeing with God's truth by . . .

I have sometimes overemphasized the importance of behaving rightly or doing the right things by . . .

I have sometimes misrepresented the character of God by . . .

I have sometimes misrepresented the Gospel as being about something other than loving God and loving others by . . .

As you complete your responses, take a few moments to discuss your responses with your partner or small group as directed by your leader.

Encourage one another to pursue deeper relationships with God and one another. Spur one another on toward vulnerability and genuine change.

Finally, offer a heart felt prayer to God. Allow your partner or small group to overhear your prayer to the Lord. Ask Him to bring change to your heart and life as you approach His Word. Your prayer might sound like:

God, change me so that I can more often experience loving relationships with You and others as I truly experience Scripture. Let me come to a deeper love for You as I encounter Your Word. Help me deepen my love for others as I read and study the Scriptures.

WHAT WILL IT LOOK LIKE TO TAKE THIS RELATIONAL JOURNEY INTO SCRIPTURE?

For the word of God is living and active (Hebrews 4:12).

This scripture tells us that the Word of God is living and active, but what is the evidence that God's Word is truly living in my life? What does it look like for the Spirit of God to take the Word of God and empower our experience of it?

What Will It Look Like in Our Personal Lives?

Taking this journey into a deepened, loving relationship with God is an experience because any relationship must be experienced. It involves more than knowledge and dutiful compliance. Our journey in loving the Lord will change our lives in relevant, meaningful ways. Here are some of the benefits of taking this journey toward a more intimate relationship with the God of the Bible:

You will live life with an expectancy of actually encountering Him the One who wrote the Book!

You will experience freedom like never before. Your Christian life will move beyond duties and obligations, from got to s to get to s. You

will be constrained by the love of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:14 KJV).

You will be empowered to actually live out what you believe. You will find that this power comes not from a doctrinal treatise or a code of conduct, but from a Person.

You will express humility instead of pride. Your heart will not be able to get over the wonder of how the Creator of the Universe meets you in His Word.

You will demonstrate vulnerability instead of judgment. You will be excited to share what God's Word is doing in you rather than only pointing out the failures of others.

What Will It Look Like in the Church?

Many church leaders seem to assume that their personal spiritual growth will occur as a by-product of ministering to others. As ministers, we study God's Word in order to preach it and teach it. But we may rarely slow down long enough to contemplate what God wants to do in our own lives, apart from what He does through us for others.

Many ministers and lay leaders are beginning to change the way they approach God's Word. Instead of spending time in Scripture primarily as a means of preparing to preach sermons, teach classes, or lead small groups, they study in order to know and to love God more intimately. This approach seems consistent with Paul's testimony: I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord (Philippians 3:8). These leaders seek to know and love God first for who He is and what He wants to do in their lives, and, second, for what He wants to do through their lives.

Paul wrote, Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom (Colossians 3:16). Do you notice a paradox in this verse? The ministry of effective Bible teaching begins by allowing something to happen in us.

Teachers must allow the Holy Spirit to work the Word into the soil of their own hearts before fruitful teaching and admonishment can



An Experience With God's Word

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).

The following sample lesson might be experienced as an adult Bible Study or worship service:

The session begins with worship and singing. Choruses and hymns describe God's justice and mercy. Each song reminds the congregation of the righteousness of God as well as His loving-kindness.

The leader might then begin the message with the bang of a gavel. A bailiff could shout the words, Hear ye, Hear ye. All rise! The court is now in session!

As the leader begins to explain the courtroom analogy, the congregation would hear the important elements of this passage in Romans:

This passage does not say that we will never be accused. We may experience the harsh treatment of other people, but as far as God is concerned, any accusations will be thrown out, and any indictments quashed.

The text does not imply that there is nothing about our lives that deserves condemnation. On the contrary, we must see our sin, own it, mourn over it, and confess it to God.

The text also does not imply that there will never be affliction or struggle for those who believe. But we have One with whom we can seek refuge in the midst of trials and tribulations.

The good news of this passage is that Christ is our advocate.

Because we are one with Christ, we are free from God's judgment and secure in our position with Him. Because of Christ, God does not only refrain from condemning us, but is well pleased with us (Matthew 17:5).

The leader might draw the congregation's attention to this related passage: Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died more than that, who was raised to life is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us (Romans 8:33, 34).

During the closing comments of the message, the leader might challenge the congregation to answer these questions within their own minds and hearts

Do you come here today as one who feels accused? Have you experienced the rejection or criticism of others? Do you feel that others are often judging or evaluating you?

Do you come here today feeling that you deserve to be condemned? Is there an area of sin in your life that has gone unconfessed or that repeatedly causes you to struggle?

Do you come here today as one who is burdened by the struggles of this world? Are you weary because of the stress of this life? Are you tired of problems or discouraged by affliction?

To each of us who experience such feelings of accusation and criticism, the apostle Paul poses the question, Who will bring any charge against you (Romans 8:33)? Paul goes on to answer this question with a declaration of truth. He explains that there is only One person with the right and power to accuse, criticize, or condemn: It is God who justifies (v. 33). Knowing that we might resist such a liberating truth, Paul asks again, Who is he that condemns (v. 34)? Again, we read that there is only One who has the right to condemn us: Jesus Christ, the One who died and was raised from the dead. He has the right and power to judge, but

notice what He is doing for those who believe: He is interceding for us (v. 34)! This is why the apostle can say, 'There is now no condemnation for us (v.1). The only One who can condemn you is praying for you!

Finally, the pastor or teacher guides the congregation through the following meditation, allowing the Holy Spirit to lead those present into an actual experience of Romans 8:33, 34. As church members experience these verses, they will encounter Jesus along the way.

Close your eyes, and form a mental picture of a courtroom. Imagine that you have just entered through the ominous, wooden doors and found your seat at the front of the room. The atmosphere is cold and frightening. You feel the intimidation of your surroundings. All the seats in the room are filled with people who have criticized and accused you in the past. There are individuals who have judged you inferior to others, passing out evaluation and critique. There are those who have rejected you or demanded that you perform according to their lofty standards. You look around and see the faces of people who have spoken against you, been harsh and cruel, abandoned and neglected you. But who can condemn? Only Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.

Suddenly, the doors at the back of the courtroom open and Jesus enters the room. You see His flowing robes, sandaled feet, and bearded face. His presence commands respect and exudes an authority unparalleled among earthly judges. His gait is dignified as He walks purposefully down the center aisle.

Rather than taking His place behind the judge's bench, Christ surprises everyone in the courtroom by turning abruptly and stopping to stand by

your side. Picture Christ standing beside you as your eyes scan the faces of everyone else in the room. You look at the ones who have condemned you. You lock eyes with the people who have offered criticism and rejection. You see the faces of those who have abandoned you.

Then Christ slowly eases His arm around your shoulder and gently leads you to join Him in a kneeling posture on the ground. Each eye in the courtroom has traced Christ's every move since He stepped through the door. You are quite certain that the crowd's collective eyes are also boring straight into your soul.

At this crucial moment, you sense a sudden respite and notice that Jesus has begun praying. You listen more closely and realize that He is praying for you! Your mind and heart are transfixed, not by the faces of the people in the room, not by their opinions or their behavior, but by the words of the Lord. He is praying earnestly, and He's praying for you! The Lord Jesus Christ the One who lived as man, died as man, and was resurrected into glory, now stoops beside you and intercedes on your behalf. The only True Judge, the sole Person in the courtroom without sin, the only One who can claim the right to bring a charge against you, now prays earnestly to His Father for you.

Keep this image in your mind and heart. Christ is kneeling beside you. His arm is cradling your shoulders, and you hear Him pause in prayer. Jesus turns His head toward yours and whispers, "Where are your accusers?" Suddenly, you glance up and realize that the courtroom is completely empty. Every one of those faces filled with condemnation has disappeared from the room. Each person who brought a charge against you has vanished. Everyone who had responded with neglect or abandonment is gone. As Jesus rises and draws you into His arms in a tearful embrace, He proclaims, "Neither do I. Neither do I accuse you. The only One who can condemn you prays for you! The only One who is equipped to judge, does not. The Holy One of the Universe cares for you!"

Pause and allow the Holy Spirit to fill your heart with wonder and grateful-



For Further Study

RELATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE IN SCRIPTURAL INTERPRETATION

On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets
(Matthew 22:40 KJV).

We must not miss the significance of Christ's words in this text. Not only do these two commandments constitute the nail on which the rest of the instructions of Scripture hang, they also provide a framework for the interpretation of God's Word. Christ's words reveal how relevance returns when Scripture comes alive through relationships.

We must approach Scripture with eyes and hearts to see both objective meaning and relational significance.

Christ seems to argue for a relational hermeneutic (principle of Scriptural interpretation) in His declaration about the greatest of commandments (Matthew 22:40). His words suggest this principle of interpreting Scripture: we must both explore the objective meaning of Scripture and encounter the relational significance of it.

We might illustrate this approach to Scripture by exploring the limited number of New Testament passages that contain the Greek word *kremannumi* (depends or hangs):

Matthew 18:6 But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck.

Imagine the scene described in this text. You see a man with a millstone hung around his neck. The stone's weight makes it difficult for the man to walk, and you see him stumbling toward the edge of a boat. You are

quite certain that if this man falls into the ocean, the weight of the stone will cause his death. With this scene in your mind's eye, you cannot focus only on the millstone's objective meaning, for to do so would be to miss the relational significance. Consider the absurdity of reacting to the situation described above by simply asking objective questions about the millstone: How much does that millstone weigh? How old might it be? Where might that millstone come from? Limiting our response to such questions would be to miss the critical significance of what we were observing. The significant issue is that the millstone is hanging around a person's neck! To miss where the millstone is hanging is to miss its relevance entirely. Christ's declaration in the Gospel of Matthew reveals that we face a similar challenge as we interpret Scripture. We often observe its objective meaning but miss its relational significance: God's Word hangs upon loving Him and loving others.

Acts 28:3, 4 Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and, as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his hand. . .

In this passage, it is certainly important to notice that a poisonous serpent came out of the fire, but to focus on its length, color, or type would be trivial in relation to the significance of the scene. The significance is found in the facts that the serpent was hanging on Paul's hand, and that Paul did not die from the poison. We may gain understanding of the meaning of a text by asking objective questions, but we must go further. We must examine the relational significance of the passage by asking ourselves, How might this encourage my love of God or empower my love for others?

Galatians 3:13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.

This text reminds us of the precious gift of redemption. Surely it is important to look toward Golgotha and see Jesus of Nazareth, but focusing only upon such objective issues as the age, weight, and physical condition of the man hanging on the tree would be preposterous, since the significance of the event is found in the fact that the Son of God was hung on a tree. (See also Acts 5:30, 10:39.)

Christ seems to argue in Matthew 22:40 that we have not finished the hermeneutic process until we have fully explored both the objective meaning and relational significance of Scripture.

Hope for Restoring Relevance

The Gospels portray Old Testament Scripture coming alive as it is fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ's first recorded sermon in Luke 4:16-21 was a routine reading of the Isaiah text: "The Spirit of the Lord is on Me . . . until He closed the book, sat down, and began to speak to the temple leaders. He said to them, 'Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. Christ brought added relevance to the Scripture, the same Scripture that has continued to change lives for centuries.

In John 5:39, Christ seemed to affirm the Pharisees' search of the Scriptures but rebuked them because they had missed the significance of the Person they read about: "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. Relevance is found in a person!"

In Acts 2:12-21, notice the relevance of the Gospel message as Peter responds to the crowd's question at Pentecost: "What does this mean?" Peter confirmed the Holy Spirit's presence with these words: "This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel. The significance was not in the sound of rushing wind or the commotion of fire, but in the fulfillment of Jesus' promise that He would not leave them as orphans. His Spirit had come.

We see, once again, that relevance is in relationship!

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

The parable of the sower (Mark 4:2-9) contains a critical message for the followers of Jesus. Christ warned us: Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? (v. 13). In some significant way, this parable is fundamental to life and faith.

As we explore the parable of the sower, we may be shocked to learn the primary lesson that Jesus was trying to teach. Through the parable of a growing seed, Christ communicated that, while hearing truth and receiving truth are essential, they are not sufficient. Truth must also be experienced.

Truth must be heard.

It is not the wisdom of men that impacts lives, nor is it clever sayings, compelling statistical research, or lessons from history. Rather, it is God's Word that is living and active and sharper than any double-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12). In the parable of the sower, Christ's disciples and the multitudes heard the truth concerning the sower, the seed, and the soil. Jesus concluded this portion of His sermon with these words: He who has ears to hear, let him hear (Mark 4:9). Truth must be heard. Truth must be received.

The disciples (and a few others) wanted to know more about this important parable. They not only heard the Word but received it and sought to embrace its significance and relevance. When they came to the Master and asked Him the meaning of the parable, Jesus gave this interpretation:

The sower is the Son of God.

The seed is the Word of God.

The soil is the hearts of men.

Satan steals some of the seed.

Some seed is received but dies when afflictions and tribulations

arise.

Some seed is received but is choked out by caring for other things.

Some seed is sown on good soil, where the heart hears the Word, accepts the Word, and bears fruit from the Word (vv. 10-20).

The multitudes heard the Word. The disciples went one step further they understood the Word. But they had yet to experience it. When we hear God's Word and even understand its meaning, but do not truly experience it, we are vulnerable to what Paul cautioned the church of Corinth about truth simply becomes knowledge that puffs up rather than love that builds up (1 Corinthians 8:1). Just like the disciples, we often hear the Word, and even receive it, but stop short of the life-changing, liberating power of experiencing it.

Truth must be experienced.

That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, Let us go over to the other side (Mark 4:35).

With this declaration, Jesus began to challenge the disciples to experience the parable of the sower. The sower (Jesus) has just sown the seed (the Word of God): Let us go over to the other side. Jesus had sown this seed upon the disciples' hearts. How did they respond? As predicted in the parable, the seed was attacked:

Satan came to destroy the Word: A furious squall came up. . . . He got up, rebuked the wind, and said to the waves, Quiet! Be still! Then the wind died down and it was completely calm (vv. 37, 39). The word rebuke in this text was used by Jesus in other passages to refer to the evil one (see also Jude 9).

Tribulation came to destroy the Word: And the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped (v. 37). In a world of tribulation, the stresses of life can come from many sources: family, friends, children, jobs, health, church, and ministry. If our hearts are not

guarded, the Word can wither within us.

Caring for other things choked out the Word: Teacher, don't You care if we drown (v. 38)? The cares of this life can focus our hearts on popularity, material possessions, or other people's success. If our hearts are not guarded, these cares will choke out the Word.

As the wind died down and the sea became perfectly calm, the Lord announced the disciples' failure concerning the parable of the sower: Do you still have no faith (v. 40)? The sowing of the seed, let us go over to the other side had brought forth no fruit. The disciples were not able to persevere through Satan's attack, tribulations, and self-interests.

What could the disciples have done differently with the Word? How could the Word have produced much fruit? They could have kept rowing the boat, confident that since the King of kings and Lord of lords had said, Let us go over to the other side, they were going to get to the other side. Consider also what the Master was hoping for. What response would have pleased the heart of Jesus? The disciples had the opportunity to experience the Word of God. They had the chance to live out the promise of Jesus. Had they done so, the 12 men would have come to know Him better and grown closer to their Master. They would have discovered a deepened sense of love for the One who protects, guides, promises, and delivers. Having heard, received, and lived out His Word, they would have come to relate to Jesus in a more intimate way. That day, the disciples encountered the critical importance of hearing, receiving, and experiencing truth.

Consider and discuss the following:

In Mark 4, the multitudes heard the parable and the disciples received it, but when they all left, no one had experienced the Word. Does this ever happen to you as you attend church or Bible studies? You may hear and receive the Word but leave without having ever experienced it. How could this dilemma be corrected? How could your church or Bible study group provide and encourage opportuni-



Additional Resources

Walter C. Kaiser and Moises Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*
(Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994).