

# Scripture Twisting

## *Guarding against a hermeneutic of convenience*

### 1. Poisoning the Loaf

*Jesus said to [the disciples], “Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” Matthew 16.6<sup>1</sup>*

#### *Love wrongly focused*

There are right ways and wrong ways of reading the Bible. As Augustine explained in his treatise, *On Christian Doctrine*, “There are certain precepts for treating the Scriptures which I think may not inconveniently be transmitted to students, so that they may profit not only from reading the work of expositors but also in their own explanations of the sacred writings to others.” Those precepts, Augustine insisted, can be discerned from the Scriptures themselves, as well as in the writings of the best teachers and thinkers of the Christian movement up to his day.

From time to time, certain people choose not to follow those tested precepts of interpretation. Instead, they come to the Bible with an agenda, a conclusion in their minds concerning what the Bible *ought* to teach about a particular topic or practice, and then they set about the task of subduing Scripture to their own preferred view. Augustine wrote of such a person that he should be *angry* with himself for twisting the Scripture away from its plain meaning, “For if he takes up rashly a meaning which the author whom he is reading did not intend, he often falls in with other statements which he cannot harmonize with this meaning. And if he admits that these statements are true and certain, then it follows that the meaning he had put upon the former passage cannot be the true one: and so it comes to pass, one can hardly tell how, that, out of *love for his own opinion*, he begins to feel more angry with Scripture than he is with himself” (emphasis added).

The “angrier” such a person becomes at Scripture, because it won’t go along with his agenda, the harder he twists it, and in more places, until it seems to be affirming his position after all – if only in his own mind.

\We come to the Scriptures out of love for God and loving the time we have to spend with Him in His Word. We love to hear His voice, to meet Him in His glory, to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ by the Word and Spirit of God, and to go forth loving God and others more truly as a result.

But if we come to the Bible loving our own views, opinions, or practices more than God and His Word, we will, in effect, *hate* the Bible whenever it disagrees with us, and we will twist and wrench and wrest and cajole the Scriptures into saying what *we* want to hear, rather than what *they* want us to hear.

#### *Control freaks*

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day were control freaks. Most of the real authority for ordering life and society had been taken away from them by the Romans. These leaders understood that, in many ways, they were puppets in the hand of Rome to keep order as the Romans chose to define it. Their power was purely contingent upon the good pleasure of the Emperor or his civil lackeys and military forces in Judea. The religious leaders lived in fear that the Romans might come and take away their place in the hierarchy of things (Jn. 11.45-48). The threat was real that the people might see through the façade of their status and pay more attention to Roman law than Hebrew Law. And where would *that* leave the leaders of Israel?

Over the years, therefore, the leaders of the Jews contrived to make themselves the focal point of Hebrew religion. They elaborated an extensive system of regulations and traditions, coupled with the threat of excommunication for dissenters, that was ostensibly designed to help the people practice the righteousness of

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God and avoid the temptations of Roman emperor worship and morality. The more the Jewish leaders proclaimed and enforced these “traditions”, the more two things began to happen.

First, the people began to feel oppressed under the heavy burden of a “works righteousness” that was bringing joy, hope, and spiritual freedom to no one. Second, and perhaps more important, the promulgation and enforcement of these traditions tended to redound to the power and prosperity of the religious leaders themselves. Every new regulation or tradition involved some twisting of Scripture to advantage the “place” and status of the religious leaders – and, as often as not, to ensure their material prosperity as well.

#### *Beware the Scripture twisters*

Jesus warned His disciples to “watch and beware” of those who bring their own brand of leaven to the work of understanding the Word of God. The “leaven” of the Jewish religious leaders was making the Bread of God’s Word into a poisonous loaf that distracted people from true love for God and neighbor, confused them as to the overall reliability of God’s Word, and made those same leaders appear as the only truly “enlightened” interpreters of the Scriptures.

These men practiced what we might call a “hermeneutics of convenience” – an approach to understanding the Bible that denies the plain meaning of Scripture, invents “deeper” or more abstract meanings, seeks to force the glass slipper of God’s good Word onto the ugly feet of step-sister theologies and worldviews, and, conveniently enough, “proves” the preferred ideas of those who indulge this practice.

Of such teachers and ministers, brethren, we do well to beware.

## 2. The Set of the Saw

*“Remember, who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same.”* Job 4.7, 8

#### *Wrong from the beginning*

I’m not a carpenter, but I know a little bit about using a circular saw. What I know is this, if you don’t have the blade set at a right angle before you begin to cut, you’re not going to be able to cut a straight board no matter how many times you try. If you want to make a straight cut, then the set of the saw is all important.

The same principle applies when interpreting the Bible. If you start from the wrong place, no matter how many texts you examine or how eloquent or passionate your argument may be, you’re not going to arrive at the truth. If the starting-point for interpretation is wrong, the interpretation will be wrong. Every time.

In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer exposes a form of Scripture twisting common in every age. An interpreter takes an idea – it may even be a Biblical idea, like grace, or love, or devotion to God, or companionship – and he elevates this idea to the status of a kind of master key for all Scripture interpretation. This master key then becomes a means for opening a passage of Scripture in a manner not in line with its plain meaning, and making it say something entirely different – even the very *opposite* – of what the text actually says. Bonhoeffer says we “do violence to the Scriptures by interpreting them in terms of abstract principles, even if that principle be a doctrine of grace.”

#### *It’s all about convenience*

Why do we do this? Because, Bonhoeffer explains, it is not *convenient* for us or *agreeable* to us simply to obey the text before us. Or because we have some other agenda we want to pursue, and it’s more convenient to our agenda to *twist* the Scriptures rather than submit to them. Bonhoeffer explains, “By eliminating simple obedience on principle, we drift into an unevangelical interpretation of the Bible. We take it for granted as we open the Bible that we have a key to its interpretation. But then the key we use would not be the living Christ,

who is both Judge and Saviour, and our use of this key no longer depends on the will of the living Holy Spirit alone. The key we use is a general doctrine of grace which we can apply as we will.”

In other words, we come to the Scriptures – or to a situation the Scriptures address – with our minds already made up as to the will of God concerning the matter. So it doesn’t really matter what the plain reading of the text indicates; we will twist those Scriptures to suit our interests, convictions, beliefs, or practices, all the while claiming that Scripture supports our view. We will “open” the Scriptures with the “key” we’ve brought to them, rather than the key of plain meaning and simple obedience.

The set of the saw is wrong, and our interpretation of Scripture is therefore not a matter of truth, but of convenience.

### *Job’s friends*

In the book of Job, Eliphaz and his friends make this classic hermeneutical blunder. They take a valid Biblical truth – in this case, divine justice – and exalt it to an ultimate abstract principle which they then use to interpret God’s will into Job’s situation. To them, “justice” was the key to understanding God’s will concerning Job’s situation. Their case is carefully reasoned and highly logical, even salted with claims to some kind of special revelation from God (cf. 4.12-21), but they must conveniently overlook some important facts in order to make it – such as the fact that upright and righteous people often do suffer and perish. Job tries valiantly to point out their inconsistencies, but to no avail. They are undeterred and continue to press their point, seeking to convert Job to their view and thus to vindicate their claim. In the process they lift many true and valid Biblical teachings and twist them to fit their interpretive framework, thus rendering those true teachings invalid and casting doubt on the reliability of God’s Word. They had made up their mind *en route* to see Job what the problem was, and they were determined to stick to their guns, come what may. In spite of the many truths they cite (Paul will actually endorse one of their claims in 1 Cor. 3.19, cf. Job 5.13), these men are condemned by God for not speaking correctly of Him (Job 42.7).

Eliphaz and his friends decided that Job was only getting what he deserved – he who was so wealthy and esteemed and pious, that, given his present troubles, they concluded it must have all just been a sham. Now we see what he’s really like. It was convenient for them to argue thus because here was an opportunity to “help” a “friend” in need. In fact, here was an opportunity, as they seem to have really seen it, to take Job down a few notches and validate their pop theology, pastoral smugness, and superior – because *they* were not suffering – righteousness.

Scripture twisters don’t really care about people – except themselves and those who agree with them. If they did, they would understand that the way to love God and others is through simple and consistent obedience to the plain teaching of the text, and not by means some contrived ideal of justice or grace or love or you-name-it.

Beware those who can look the plain teaching of Scripture in the face and rationalize their way around simple obedience. The set of their saw will rip you to shreds.

# Scripture Twisting

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## 3. The Desire for Respectability

*“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”* Matthew 7:21-23

### *Lawlessness*

Jesus said these people claiming to have done many good works *in the Lord’s name* were actually practicing a form of lawlessness. *Lawlessness?* How could that be?

To practice lawlessness is to act in a manner not motivated by love for God and neighbor, since love is the fulfilling of the Law, as is plainly revealed in the books of Moses and throughout the rest of Scripture (cf. Matt. 22:34-40; 24:12). It is obviously possible to do many things in the name of the Lord which might seem to be works of ministry, even mighty works. But if these are performed apart from love for God and neighbor, out of mere self-interest, such “good works” cannot please Him. Instead, they will be only lawless, loveless works, motivated by nothing more than self-interest.

All such works, undertaken to gratify self, as a means for boasting about one’s goodness, bring only condemnation from the Lord. They represent another form of a hermeneutics of convenience, in which the plain teaching of Scripture is interpreted and applied not for love of God and neighbor, but for mere self-interest, as a way of gaining respectability and esteem in the eyes of others.

### *What were they thinking?*

How do they reason who undertake such works? What are they thinking? Since love for God and neighbor and boasting in the Lord are not the set of their interpretive saw, then they must see in good works an opportunity to attach some merit to themselves and to attract the praise of men. That is, knowing that Scripture teaches that doing good works is commendable (though by and for God only), such people undertake good works, sometimes at great sacrifice and with impressive results, however, not for God’s praise and the honor of Christ (though doubtless these are mentioned), but for *their own honor* and to be *admired by men*. Their “key” to opening Scripture with respect to good works is to do works in a way which makes them look good.

They take up the teaching of Scripture, not according to its purposes, but for their own self-vaunting ends. In so doing they rob God of His glory, Who alone does good works in and through men (Phil. 2:12, 13). When it is *convenient* to give them something to boast about, and to *draw attention to themselves*, they will do good works. When they do good works, they make sure others know about them. But in doing good works in order to gain respectability for themselves, they wrest the Scriptural teaching off its intended course, and twist and bend it away from its designed end.

Some of the best thinkers in Christendom have fallen prey to this desire for respectability in their interpretation of God’s Word. The Apostle Paul called out Peter on this failing in Antioch, as he reports in Galatians 2. John Frame argues that even some Christian academics do this, twisting Scripture and bending their teaching in ways that dodge or re-interpret the plain meaning of the text in order to curry favor with secular scholars. Frame explains, “the quest for respectability, a frequent quest in the history of Christian thought, is often motivated by ungodly pride” (“Inerrancy: A Place to Stand,” *JETS*, March 2014).

Certainly preachers and theological popularizers are guilty of this, too, who bend their teaching to the whims of men or the spirit of the age, and thus gain attention for themselves as “relevant” or “compassionate” or “thoughtful.” So also, many people who do good works at various levels and in various arenas of the Church, talk boastfully, without actually seeming to boast – their “testimonies” about how God “used them” showing both the reality of God’s goodness and their own ungodly desire to look good to their peers.

Such dealing with Scripture, for mere personal benefit rather than the honor and glory of God, reveals a lack of the true knowledge of Christ and provokes His condemnation. Doing good works in order to look good to others is actually a form of lawlessness, and Jesus condemns it. Good works undertaken as a convenient way of gaining attention and vaunting ourselves are just another form of Scripture twisting that might have appeal to men, but that is anathema to God.

When it comes to interpreting the Bible, the only respect we should be seeking is that which is due God’s Word, the plain meaning it sets forth, and the simple obedience it requires.

#### 4. Not No, but Better

*It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife.* 1 Corinthians 5.1

*What to do?*

We are describing an approach to interpreting the Bible which we call a *hermeneutics of convenience*. The chief characteristic of this practice involves twisting Scripture to fit one’s pre-conceived ideas or preferences concerning particular subjects or practices. Those who practice a hermeneutics of convenience begin their approach to understanding Scripture with what they regard as a key idea or principle. From there they twist the Scripture as much as is necessary to support their view, thus conveniently using the Word of God to endorse a belief or practice which does not cohere with the plain meaning of the Bible.

Another form of a hermeneutics of convenience is to simply reject or ignore parts of Scripture which are either too difficult or simply not convenient for our purposes. Let us imagine a situation in which a young person has come to our church full of enthusiasm for Christ and eager to get growing in the Lord. He doubtless has a large network of young people whom he could influence for the Gospel and perhaps bring with him to church. His love for Christ seems genuine, and his enthusiasm for the Lord is infectious.

There’s just one problem: He’s living in an immoral relationship – a relationship that is clearly out of line with the teaching of Scripture throughout.

What do we do? We are reluctant to confront him because he might move along to some other church. He probably doesn’t see this relationship as immoral because, after all, many of his friends are similarly involved. It might even be that he will be the way God brings his lover into a saving relationship with Christ. So what do we do?

*Choking on the Law*

If you are the leaders of the church in Corinth in Paul’s day, you do nothing. You just put up with the situation and hope for the best. You know that the Law of God – and, indeed, all the rest of Scripture – forbids and condemns such relationships (cf. Deut. 22.30; Lev. 20.11; Matt. 14.3, 4, etc.). It even prescribes the death penalty for those who persist in them. But because you’re not in a position to enforce the plain meaning of the Law of God – the Church, after all, does not bear the sword – you either don’t know *what* to do or simply choose to do nothing. You choke on the Law and, like anything else you choke on, you cough it up and spit it out, or die from it.

It's clear that the leaders of the church in Corinth were pleased with their decision to let this young man continue in his adulterous relationship. In fact, they boasted about their "tolerance" or "patience" or "understanding" with respect to this situation. They had elevated a principle of "grace" above the plain teaching of Scripture. And, since they could not fully understand what obedience to the Law required, even though the plain teaching of the Law was not to be denied, they set that plain teaching aside and submitted to their principle as a matter of convenience in keeping peace in the church.

The Corinthians, being largely Hebrews, knew the Law, but they assumed that they were no longer bound by it because of the grace of the Gospel. They were under grace, not Law. So, rather than deal with this situation as the Law requires, by removing the offender from their midst in a manner consistent with the teaching of Jesus (cf. Matt. 18.15-20), they decided not to do anything and were proud of their non-judgmental attitude toward their fellow believer. Why, they even exceeded the Gentiles in their toleration of this situation! They had become puffed up with their non-judgmentalism and tolerance, and their manifest scorn for the revelation of God. They were doing exactly what Bonhoeffer warned against in *The Cost of Discipleship*, turning an abstract principle into a general hermeneutical norm, and thereby twisting Scripture to fit their own convenience.

#### *Not no interpretation, but better*

It fell to Paul to set them straight. He showed them that the solution to this difficult situation was not *no* interpretation of God's Law, but *better*. No, the church does not bear the sword, and so it could not apply the death penalty to this young man. But that didn't mean it should not condemn his immoral practice and call him to obedience. Paul's understanding of the Scriptures drew on the fact that, in the Law of God, separation from the altar and community of the Lord was a condemnation which had the same effect as the death penalty. The church does not bear the sword, but the church should put out from its membership those who flout the plain teaching of God's Law, until such time as repentance is evidenced and they can return.

Those who twist the Scripture for their own convenience will also simply reject as no longer relevant those texts which do not fit their ideas, views, or practices. They have to deal with them nonetheless, so rather than seek help for *better* interpretations, they simply choose *no* interpretations at all, and reject whatever of Scripture is not convenient for them.

### 5. The Trap of Tradition

[Jesus] answered them, "Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" Matthew 15.3

#### *Scripture and tradition*

It is a mistake to think that traditions of interpreting the Bible should not be considered when it comes to how we read and understand the Scriptures. Every believer will affirm that we need the guard rails of reliable tradition to keep us on the right path of Scripture interpretation. This is why we have creeds and confessions, why we cling to the old hymns and forms of worship, why we venerate certain thinkers and expositors from previous generations, and follow the teaching of reliable contemporary interpreters.

The history of the Christian movement has accumulated a venerable tradition of interpretation that is indispensable to right reading and understanding of Scripture. We reject or ignore that tradition to our peril.

At the same time, we must always be careful that the tradition we embrace does not lead us to interpret the Bible in a manner at odds with the plain teaching of the text. Any tradition of interpretation – or any teacher or expositor or preacher – which leads us to ignore, side-step, or disobey the plain teaching of the Bible is a tradition *outside* the true understanding of Scripture which the Church has maintained over the centuries. All such interpretations are usually some form of a hermeneutics of convenience, embracing a new way of understanding the Bible as the key to interpreting all of Scripture and, as typically happens, of endorsing something someone would like to do for his own advantage.

### *Devoted to God*

The religious leaders of Jesus' day were masters at this. We might all agree that it's a good idea to devote things to God. Everything that we have comes from the Lord, and therefore it makes sense that everything we have should be devoted to Him.

As a general principle, that's true enough. But when you take that general principle, then abstract it as *the key* to understanding the Bible, Scripture twisting is not far away. The religious leaders of Jesus' day, as we have seen, were the keepers of a body of spiritual regulations designed to order Jewish religious practice and to keep the people from wandering toward the religious practices of paganism. As part of this system they had determined that it was a good thing to encourage special offerings to God – “things devoted”, as the Law of God describes them – as a kind of sacrificial, extra gift for the temple and its services. Since the temple was always in some stage of construction or repair, and services there were constant, the need for such extra offerings might have been readily apparent. All the religious leaders had to do was dress their demands up in the garb of noble spiritual tradition, and it would be easy enough to entrap a trusting populace.

It was convenient that all such special offerings, such “acts of devotion” to God, also redounded to the advantage of the religious leaders in two ways. First, they made the leaders and their role in the community more central and significant, if only because now more revenue was flowing their way; and second, the practice of encouraging special gifts devoted to the Lord's service provided a source of additional funds from which the leaders could draw for their own purposes. Because these funds were “devoted to the Lord,” all some priest had to do was come up with something in his own interests under that rubric, and his project would be funded from the *Corban* of the people.

Meanwhile, funds that might have been available to help take care of one's elderly parents were being siphoned off as *Corban*, things devoted to God. God is clear that people should care for their parents as for all those in their household. Paul regarded this as so important that, to ignore it, he insisted, would make one worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim. 5.8). This regulation concerning things devoted to God created a way of appearing to be very spiritual within the community of faith, but it weakened an important bond of love between parents and their children and introduced a further measure of corruption and injustice into Judean society.

The Jewish leaders had, for their own convenience and as a way of controlling the resources of the believing community, established a tradition which sounded like it had a noble purpose, but distorted a Biblical idea and, in the process, introduced unnecessary tensions and want in the households of Judea. Doubtless trumpeting “service to God and His temple” as the motive for such a scheme, they established a tradition which trapped people in disobedience to God by encouraging them to neglect certain requirements of the fifth commandment.

### *The sacrifice of love*

As with every practice of Scripture twisting, something done in the name of love – in this case, love for God's temple – actually ends up compromising love as God defines it. People may have considered that their special gifts of devotion, entrusted to the religious leaders, were a kind of “sacrifice of love.” But what they were actually doing was sacrificing love as God defines and intends it on an altar of mere self-love, thus weakening both the authority of Scripture and the bonds of love within families and the community as a whole.

Is it any wonder that this community, following those leaders, would act out of mere self-love and self-interest in failing to recognize, and in condemning the Messiah of God when He came among them, pointing to the Scriptures to validate His message and His claims?

# Scripture Twisting

## *Guarding against a hermeneutic of convenience*

### 6. Released from the Law?

*But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the life of the Spirit.* Romans 7.6

#### *Under grace*

In our day one of the most widespread ways the hermeneutics of convenience operates to eviscerate the authority of Scripture and rob the Church of love for God and neighbors is by neglecting the Law of God. Having persuaded ourselves that we are “not under Law, but under grace,” we set the Law of God aside and pretend to define our Christian ethics by some abstract principle of grace or love or compassion.

Do you hear that? We have taken a perfectly good Biblical idea – grace – and made it *the* interpretive key to the Bible.

But the only legitimate interpretive key to the Bible is the Holy Spirit, Who gave us the Word, teaches us the Word by comparing Scripture with Scripture, and empowers us to obey the Word according to its plain teaching. And the Holy Spirit is not *merely* the Spirit of grace. He is also the Spirit of truth, of judgment, of power, of discipline, of illumination, and of a sound mind. Put grace in the place of God’s Spirit, and you will always interpret the Word of God in a way designed to convenience your own understanding of grace.

And, typically these days, this entails ignoring or even disobeying the Law of God.

#### *Released from the Law?*

But Paul says we have been “released” from the Law. In what sense have we been released or delivered from the Law? Not from its role as definer of good and evil, for Paul says that through the Law comes the knowledge of sin (v. 7), and John teaches that sin is lawlessness (1 Jn. 3.4).

Not from the standard of goodness and good works which the Law provides, for if it shows us our sin it must also, being holy and righteous and good (vv. 12, 16), indicate the way of righteousness (cf. Ps. 1; 1 Jn. 2.1-6). The Law thus remains established as a standard of goodness (Rom. 3.31).

Then are we delivered from the Law as a means to spiritual health and growth? No, because as Paul says, the Law is spiritual (v. 14), and it is the core curriculum by which the Spirit brings us to the glory of God and forms us into the image of Christ (Ezek. 36.26, 27; 2 Cor. 3.12-18).

Perhaps the Law has been superseded by the Spirit and Kingdom of God? But Jesus said that keeping the Law and teaching it to others is the way to greatness in the Kingdom of God (Matt. 5.17-19).

How then are we delivered from the Law? We are delivered from the Law’s power to condemn and kill us, which power it wielded within our souls while we were yet in our sins (vv. 5, 6; cf. Rom. 2.14, 15). Our conscience is no longer a slave to the Law but to Christ, so that, whenever we would be condemned by the Law for transgression, we know that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ and to whom the righteousness of Christ is credited by grace through faith (Rom. 8.1; 3.19-22).

#### *The right use of the Law*



So while the Law no longer *condemns* those who are in Christ, it still *convicts* us of sin, righteousness, and judgment in the classroom of the Spirit (Jn. 16.8-11). And while it does not *save*, it is a primary means by which the Spirit enables us to *work out our salvation* in ways that are pleasing to God and beneficial for us in realizing the life and good works for which we have been redeemed (Phil. 2.12, 13; Lev. 18.1-5; Eph. 2.8-10). The Law guides us in realizing the liberty we possess as sons and daughters of God (Jms. 2.8-12), and it teaches us both the ways of love and how to read all the rest of Scripture in order to truly understand the ways of love (Matt. 22.34-40). This does not mean that all the Law remains valid (cf. Heb. 7-9), or that the *letter* of the Law must be applied as originally given; we seek to know the *spirit* of the Law in these latter days of the Spirit of God, not merely the letter of it (cf. Deut. 30.1-10; 2 Cor. 3.5-11; 1 Cor. 5.1ff; cf. Lev. 18.8; 1 Cor. 9.8-14).

But to neglect, minimize, or scorn the Law, pleading that we are *delivered* from it and no longer *obligated* to it, since we are under grace not Law, is to be in danger of failing in the way of righteousness (Ps. 1), compromising the ways of love (Matt. 24.12), and of making even one's prayers an abomination in the sight of God (Prov. 28.9).

Why do we do this? I suspect because it simply isn't *convenient* for us to learn and obey the Law of God. And sadly, this is particularly true with respect to the commandments related to Sabbath-keeping. So if we can dispense with the Law as a guide to moral conduct, substituting instead an abstract principle of grace, then we can pick and choose from the Law as suits our understanding of grace, that is, as suits our convenience.

## 7. Whom Will You Serve?

*Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.* Romans 10.1-

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### *A classic case*

The Jewish teachers and theologians of Jesus' day present a classic case of the hermeneutics of convenience. Enslaved by the Romans, they clung to their religious beliefs and the social structures these prescribed as a way of preserving their dignity against the humiliations of an Edomite puppet king, having to pay taxes to Caesar, and the presence everywhere of Roman soldiers and petty officials. They looked upon their traditions as making them righteous in comparison to the barbarians in their midst, and they, with all zeal and some good intentions, subjugated their own people to their interpretations and traditions, thus enslaving and misleading them, all in the name of the Lord.

Thus, being servants of Rome, they made all their Jewish brethren servants of a tradition which, ostensibly grounded in the Law of God, was in fact a mere human contrivance, put in place for the convenience of men. The religious leaders of Jesus' day searched the Scriptures, because, as Jesus explained, they believed that what they read there – the righteousness of the Law – was the way to eternal life (Jn. 5.39). But, as Jesus elsewhere explained (Matt. 22.29), and as Paul affirms in our text, they were mistaken, because, blinded by their socially- and culturally-induced prejudices and preconceptions, they *did not really know the Scriptures*, and they did not know the power of God. They did not begin their search for dignity, meaning, and life from the Scriptures themselves, from their plain meaning, but from the prejudices and predispositions which emerged from their cultural circumstances. They read their Bibles through the eyes of culture, rather than through the eyes of God and Christ.

The result, over the course of a century prior to Jesus and Paul, was the imposing of a social structure that was agreeable to Rome – the ultimate pragmatists in such matters – and comfortable for the Jewish leaders, who feared losing their place of social significance more than offending their God (cf. Jn. 11.47, 48).

### *Loving the blind*

It seems strange to say that these theologians did not know the Scriptures, but we recall this is Jesus' judgment, not ours. They knew a good deal of Scripture, that much is clear. And they knew how to twist the Scriptures to support their preferred views and schemes. But in so doing, they were in error, as Jesus observed, and the power of God for love eluded them.

We note that Paul, like Jesus Who wept for the blindness of the Jews, neither despised nor condemned these interpreters and their benighted followers; instead, he loved them, pled and argued with them, and subjected himself to their anger and scorn. He never ceased proclaiming the Kingdom and righteousness of God (Acts 28.30, 31), which are in Jesus, Who alone is the end of God's Law.

#### *A proper hermeneutic*

A proper hermeneutic begins, not with social and cultural conditions and how we define ourselves against and within these, but with Jesus, as revealed throughout Scripture, and the Law and righteousness of God, as interpreted by the Prophets and Apostles and consummated in Jesus. In order to serve God and Jesus Christ we must *begin* with God and Jesus Christ and follow the plain meaning of the Word of God and Christ as this is revealed in Scripture.

Any other starting point for interpreting the Word of God will be imposed on the Word from *outside* the Word. Thus, it will always have to bend and twist the Scriptures to support and endorse the conclusions, views, or practices implicit in whatever may be the preferred interpretive key. All who allow their understanding of Scripture to be shaped by abstract principles imposed on the Bible from beyond its pages will end up serving the views and interpretations of men.

If we want to serve God, by loving Him and our neighbors, we must begin *with* God, in His Word, following the plain meaning of the text as it points to Jesus Christ and the way of obedience. If we allow our culture to define the terms by which we read and study our Bibles, we will no longer be serving God but merely the interests of the culture, by twisting God's Word to make it agree with or endorse whatever opinion or practice the culture seems most willing to endorse.

In our reading and study of the Bible, we will either serve God, allowing Him to explain the terms of love and to guide and empower us for obedience; or we will serve something outside the Bible, something from the spirit of the age or the temper of the times, something that will deceive us about the true nature of love and trap us in human perspectives and schemes.