

The Bible Is Meant to Be Twisted

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[0 : 01] This is a series that we're going to call Misinterpreting Paul, and for many of us, we maybe began the year with a Read the Bible Through a Year series, or maybe you've done that some year prior, or maybe you stare at a Bible which is gathering dust on a nightstand or a coffee table, and you have given up on the Bible.

Because it's filled with confusing, confounding, violent, weird things, and for many of us, the center of those things is in the writings and the persons of Paul.

Now, there are two reasons, I think, two big picture umbrella reasons why we give up on the Bible. We either misinterpret or we misapply, or someone misinterprets for us and misapplies for us.

Let me give you some examples. We misinterpret. It means we have this book or this library of books called the Bible in front of us, and we've got to figure out what to do with it. All books need to be interpreted.

You read it. You have to make sense of it. And so we have to deal with the language and the culture and the background and the particular ways that they speak. And we do this on a regular basis, not just with 2,000 or 3,000-year-old books.

[1 : 16] We also do it with people from different cultures who speak different languages or have different dialects. So, you know, let me give you an example. Just one example of things that we have to interpret are idioms.

So can you put up this paragraph on the screen for me, Skylar? This is an idiom of a student who wrote a paragraph, and this is what they wrote. They said, When I entered university, I lived in a small town near Tokyo, and this was the first time I lived alone.

I felt it was a feather in my cap. I had nothing but a small bicycle, but I felt happy every day. I wasn't afraid to lose my shirt because I always lived on a shoestring.

I didn't become hot under the collar because everyone helped me kindly. I found a part-time job in a supermarket. The owner was a bit of a stuffed shirt. So I tried to keep his shirt on and to handle our customers with kid gloves.

The experience taught me a sense of responsibility. Now, if you are a professional writer, you're probably looking at this and wincing. Right, Robert? Yeah, yeah. And if you are a speaker, if English is your second or third or fourth language, you're probably looking at this and being like, Huh?

[2 : 21] Can somebody tell me more? These are all idioms. And if you're a native language speaker, a native English speaker, then you look at these and you realize it's kind of bad writing, but you at least know what the person is trying to get across.

Now, this is an English example. Let me give you a Hebrew example. In the book of Amos chapter 4, Prophet Amos tells us that God will curse a city with whiteness of teeth.

He's going to curse a city with whiteness of teeth. Does anybody have any guesses what this idiom means? Sarvation. That's exactly right. With famine. With having no food.

Because one dental benefit of not eating is no cavities, I suppose. That's what God is going to curse the city with. With famine. With a lack of food. So, we can get confused by stories in the Bible.

Like, there's a story about Jesus going into Jerusalem. And he goes and he sees a tree. He's hungry. He wants to eat food from the tree. So, he sees a tree, sees no fruit, and curses the tree, even though it's not even a season for fruit.

[3 : 24] And then Jesus keeps going and he goes into the temple. And imagine if, like, you know, a man came into your place of worship and started flipping over tables and stopping everybody from worshipping.

And then they go back to the tree. And after Jesus has cussed out this tree, Peter is like, Whoa, Jesus, this tree is dead now. What did you do? And Jesus' response is like, Hey, if you see this

mountain and cast it into the sea, well, if you have faith in your little baby hearts, you can do the same thing.

Amen. And we're like, What? Is Jesus having, like, a hormone day? Like, what is happening with Jesus and the tables and the cursing of the tree and all of that?

Now, I could tell you some details about how the authors of the Bible like to take one story and then sort of second story and then go back to the first story so that we know that the fig tree is related to the temple and that in the Old Testament, fig trees were a symbol of God's presence.

And so Jesus is doing something about the temple and something about the fig tree and saying something about not just any mountain, but specifically the temple mountain being thrown into the sea. And I could give you some context, but at that point, most of you just want to put the Bible back on the shelf because it's so much.

[4 : 36] So we misinterpret or we don't know how to interpret, and so we give up on the Bible or we misapply. Like, for instance, I could come up here and say, now, Amos 4.6, God says he's going to curse the city with a whiteness of teeth.

And so we know that whiteness of teeth is a curse. So you all take your toothpaste and you throw it away. It's God's word. It would be really bad misapplication. But there are similar things that happen.

Like, for instance, one of the favorite arguments of those who want to encourage patriarchy or something called complementarianism, the idea that women are subordinate to men, is they use a creation order argument.

Well, men were created first. And so that means that women, well, they have to submit to the men because the men were created first, which logically, therefore, implies that men have to submit to whales, and whales have to submit to birds, and birds submit to the sun.

That's bad misinterpretation and this bad misapplication because someone is actually making this argument. Men were created first, so women have to submit. And then making women have to live like that.

[5 : 44] Or Matthew 9.22, Your faith has healed you, Jesus says. So that must mean that the reason why you didn't get better after you prayed or you prayed for your grandma, your aunt, your mom, your dad, well, the reason they didn't get better is you must not have had enough faith.

Mark 10.12, Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. Well, that must mean that anybody who is divorced can't be allowed a communion or be allowed to remarry.

Certainly no one would actually say that. Yes, the church I pastored, there was a woman that we would do communion, and me and the other pastors would notice that she would always stay seated.

And we knew that she called herself a Christian, she followed Jesus, she was serving, and she never went up to the communion table. And so in this very pastor-worldly sensitive moment, I went up to her after service, and I said, like, hey, we noticed you'd never go to communion.

No judgment. I was just kind of curious why. She said, well, I didn't think I was allowed. And I said, I'm sorry. Why did you think that? She says, well, my last church, that's what they told me. I've been divorced.

[6 : 47] And so I was told I was never allowed back at the table. And so we put our Bibles back on the shelves, because bad misinterpretation and bad misapplication.

Which brings us to the person of Paul. Now, I don't know about you, but if you've been on Twitter, Christian Twitter, anytime recently, it is trendy to hate on Paul. Very, very trendy.

Now, Paul, he's an important dude, and he wrote 14 out of 27 books of the New Testament. That's 28% of the words of the New Testament. And people like to hate on him, because Paul will say things like this.

Next slide. Do not be deceived. Homosexuals will not inherit the kingdom of God. Next slide. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man.

She must be quiet. Next one. Wives, submit to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. Now, as the church submits to Christ, so I'll show wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

[7 : 53] Or Colossians 3. Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything. And so you read this list of things, and you have to assume, well, Paul must be a homophobic, sexist, patriarchal, racist jerk.

Right? But, that brings us back to this interpretation question. What if there are some interpretation issues that we need to deal with? What if I told you that the word translated homosexual in 1 Corinthians 6 actually comes from two separate words, and prior to 1946, they were translated as perverts and pedophiles and sexual abusers, and there was no such thing as a homosexual in the first century AD.

What if I told you that the word translated assume authority in 1 Timothy is used nowhere else in Scripture, and when used in other Greek sources, is translated as murder or domineer?

But what if I told you that the word submit in Ephesians 5, as in wives submit to your husbands, the word submit's not actually there in the original language? What if I told you that African-American slaves in the 1700s and 1800s, they saw verses like Colossians 3 and Ephesians 6 not as proof of the Bible being pro-slavery, but of being pro-freedom?

There's this beautiful quote by abolitionist and statesman Frederick Douglass, and he writes this.

He says, What do we do in such a case when Scripture is used to support your oppression?

[9 : 23] Do you go and throw your Bible into the fire? Do you sing out no union with the Bible? I bet you would all love to sing that song each Sunday, right? Do you declare that a thing is bad because it has been misused and abused and made bad use of?

Do you throw it away on that account? No. You press it to your bosom all the more closely, you read it all the more diligently, and you prove from its pages that it is on the side of liberty and not on the side of slavery.

So what we're going to do for the next four weeks, me and the preaching team, is that we're going to try to argue that Paul actually affirms the inclusion of LGBTQ people in God's kingdom.

That Paul actually argues for gender equality, for church participation and leadership. That Paul actually argues for mutual partnership and equality in marriage.

That Paul actually argues for the end is it not the continuation of slavery? So those are some big goals that we're going to try to un-misinterpret Paul.

[10 : 32] That's the hope. But what if at the end of the four weeks, you're not convinced? What if you go back to those verses in 1 Timothy and Colossians and Ephesians, and your assumption is that, no, Paul really still is a jerk?

What if you think that what me and the preaching team are going to do is just a bunch of like exegetical gobbledygook that's more interested in protecting the Bible and the authors of the Bible than an actual honest assessment of the Bible's sexist and homophobic and otherwise problematic tendencies?

Well, I've got good news. If you're still not convinced, the good news is that at the point that the Bible diminishes your ability to love God and love your neighbor, ignoring the Bible would be the most biblical thing to do.

I'll read that again. At the point that the Bible diminishes your ability to love God and to love your neighbor, ignoring the Bible would be the most biblical thing to do.

And I say ignoring, but actually I'm going to go further than that. Put it simply, the Bible is meant to be twisted. Now, if you go back to Christian Twitter, you'll see all sorts of claims and arguments that like, well, you're just twisting the Bible.

[11 : 52] You want to love those people? You want to invite those people in? You want to include these people? You're just twisting the words of Scripture. And I'm here like to tell you to make the argument, to make the case, that Scripture is meant to be twisted.

I put on my Instagram that this was an overly provocative title for a sermon. But I think there's a point that I want to get across. First thing, if you were ever concerned that I was going to be like, be here for a year or two and then make my way on to a different church, this sermon will make sure I won't get hired anywhere else again.

And for those who were wishing that I would move on, I'm sorry, you're stuck with me. But seriously, we don't actually talk enough about interpreting the Bible and how the Bible itself gives specific instructions and examples about how to bend or twist Scripture towards principles of love and inclusion and human flourishing.

The Bible itself does that. I want to give you an example. Exodus 21 talks about slaves. It says, when you buy a male Hebrew slave, he will serve you for six years.

But in the seventh year, he will go free without any payment. If he came in single, he will leave single. If he came in married, then his wife will leave with him. But if his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons and daughters, the wife and children belong to the master, he will leave single.

[13 : 22] And when a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shouldn't be set free in the same way as male slaves are set free. So you read Exodus 21, and this is one of those, like, let's rip it out of the Bible and burn it and shove it and put away kind of passages.

Because you realize, oh, dear God, this is terrible. This is about slavery and about the subjugation of women and how can we possibly worship a God who puts things in the Bible like this?

Now, you've got Exodus, and then you also have the book of Deuteronomy. Now, it depends on who you ask. Some will tell you that the book of Deuteronomy was written 40 years after the book of Exodus. Exodus was written at Mount Sinai, the very finger of God inscribing the rules onto the stone tablets that Moses delivers to the people.

Then he sees them build an idol and he breaks the tablets, so he has to go back to the mountain and God has to do it again. And then he has the stone tablets. So you have that story. And then 40 years later, Deuteronomy is a story about the Israelites finally making their way into the promised land.

Now, some other people will tell you that Deuteronomy isn't just 40 years past, it's 400 years past, that people were taking the stories of their people and they were adapting it to their time after they had been exiled in Babylon.

[14 : 36] Regardless, the point is you have this book which is reflecting on Exodus and it's saying, let's talk about those rules again for a new generation.

40 years, 400 years, no matter what, this is a new book talking about Exodus. And this is what Deuteronomy says. It says, if any of your fellow Hebrews, male or female, sell themselves into your service, so now you're not buying them, they sell themselves into your service, they can work for you for six years but in the seventh year, you must set them free from your service.

Furthermore, when you set them free from your service, you must not let them go empty-handed, do the same thing for female slaves. Do you see the differences?

Exodus, Exodus, they are set free after seven years but don't give them anything. Deuteronomy, make sure that they leave with something. Exodus, well, this doesn't include the women.

Deuteronomy, this absolutely includes the women. So within the Bible, we see this movement, what some scholars would call a redemptive hermeneutical principle. This is why I actually do have a hope of a job because this is the way biblical scholars talk about the Bible.

[15 : 47] A redemptive hermeneutical Bible or a principle for moving from slavery to freedom. All right? We see this within the pages of Scripture.

Now, I bet you can imagine that there was like a Gospel Coalition conference where they're talking about the new Deuteronomy, the new book in the Bible that's reflecting on Exodus and there are some really grumpy men, probably, who are like, we can't change Exodus.

It says, don't set the women free. We don't set the women free. It's God's Word. But that's not what we have in Deuteronomy. Whoever put it together, whoever wrote it, whoever decided that it was going to be in our Bibles made a decision.

We're going to make a movement from slavery to freedom, to a gender hierarchy, to a gender equality, and it's in the Bible. I'll give you a Jesus example.

Jesus' first sermon is in his hometown of Nazareth, and he is assigned a reading. They had like a set readings for each Saturday, each Sabbath of the year, and Jesus gets Isaiah 61, which says this.

[17 : 01] It says, the Spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, except that's not exactly what Jesus says.

Because if you go to Luke chapter 4, Jesus' first sermon, he's given Isaiah 61, he reads it, and he doesn't read the day of vengeance of our God.

He leaves it out. He sits down. He didn't finish the reading. He doesn't say the words the day of vengeance. Another Jesus example, Luke chapter 6.

One Sabbath, as Jesus was going through the wheat fields, his disciples were picking heads of wheat, rubbing it in their hands and eating them. First century version of a snack machine.

Some Pharisees said, why are you breaking the Sabbath law? Jesus replied, haven't you read what David and his companions did when they were hungry? He broke the law by going into God's house and eating the bread of presence, which only the priests are supposed to eat.

[18 : 13] And he also gave the bread to his companions. In other words, what Jesus is doing is he's prioritizing something over Torah, over the law, over Exodus and Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

He's saying there's a value in a principle that ranks even higher than that. You know what that principle is? Hunger. Being hungry. The idea of a human being hungry to Jesus was more important than how they were going to follow Torah.

That was the principle that ranked above. Let me do one example from Paul. Romans 10, Paul was making a contrast between righteousness which comes from the law and the righteousness which comes from faith.

And so Paul first quotes Leviticus 18 about righteousness which comes from obeying the rules or the commands of the law. Paul quotes Leviticus 18 which says, the person who does these things will live by them.

In other words, if you want to live according to the old ways, then you're going to be stuck in a do, do, do exhausting system forever. But Paul goes on. The righteousness that comes from faith says, quote, the word is near you in your mouth and in your heart.

[19 : 33] That is the message that we preach. In other words, a righteousness that comes from faith, faith-based righteousness, isn't about what you do, it's about who you are. It's not about doing, it's about being.

It's not about externals, it's about internals. So how does Paul prove this? Well, the italicized quote, the word that is near you in your mouth and in your heart, comes from Deuteronomy chapter 30.

It comes from the Old Testament. It comes from the Torah. It comes from the commands. Paul is using an Old Testament passage which knew nothing about Jesus, knew nothing about the thing that we call the good news or the gospel.

Paul takes a Deuteronomy passage and makes it about Jesus, which we're like, yeah, so whatever. But for a person in that time, that means that Paul is twisting scripture to fit around Jesus.

I'm giving you a set of examples of how scripture does this within itself again and again and again and again. A movement from slavery to freedom. A principle that ranks higher than the law and that's human hunger.

[20 : 43] the idea that Paul feels the absolute freedom to take the old passages, the old stories, the old commands, the old rules, the old regulations and bend them to Jesus.

Now, modern day Bible readers would cry foul. You're taking that out of context. You're twisting God's word to fit your agenda. Exactly.

That's right. As long as we are twisting God's word to push us towards love and justice and reconciliation, then we are doing exactly what God's word wants us to do.

And this, of course, has always been the whole point. Jesus said it. I gave you these commands so that you can love each other. These are words of instructions.

Why did I do this? So that you can love each other. If these commands are not helping you love each other, then it's a bad understanding of scripture. Paul said it. The only thing that matters is faith expressing itself through love.

[21 : 51] Galatians 5 continues. The entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command. Love your neighbor as yourself. Karen Keene, biblical scholar, writes, I came to a greater understanding how biblical mandates function.

She says, I learned that laws in and of themselves do not automatically fulfill the will of God. Biblical mandates are only meaningful in their particularities if they achieve the purpose to which they point. Love of God and love of neighbor. We know that we've come to a good understanding of scripture if it is moving us towards love of God and love of neighbor.

And if it fails at doing that, we've misunderstood it. We can only know that we've come at a good understanding of scripture if it moves us towards love of God and love of neighbor.

Now, the warning in this is that, yeah, there are bad ways to twist scripture. Don't hear me wrong. If your twisting of scripture only ever leads to your comfort, if your twisting of scripture only ever leads to your own privilege, if your twisting of scripture only ever leads to your cozy and comfiness, then you might need to keep wrestling with it.

[23 : 15] Because it's not, scripture should be twisted to love of God and love of neighbor, about self-sacrificial love, about a love that is others-oriented and others-giving.

And if it fails at that, then yeah, we've twisted scripture in a bad way. But if we don't twist scripture in a way that leads us to love, then the job is not yet done. Now, none of that excuses bad

interpretation of scripture.

If Paul never said gay people are excluded from God's kingdom, then we shouldn't be putting words in God, in Paul's mouth. If Paul never actually proposed a hierarchical view of women or marriage or the inferiority of women or other genders, then we shouldn't smear Paul's reputation because some biblical interpreter took their sexism and painted Paul with it.

I think Paul, if brought into today's world and writing letters for today's churches, would welcome our LGBTQ friends with open arms, would fight against systemic racism, and would loudly denounce anyone who sees women as inferior or subordinate to men.

But even if you're not convinced that Paul would agree with anything I just said, it's our responsibility as Christians to bend Paul's words to those conclusions.

[24 : 42] Christians should be the loudest and most active participants in the project of making the world more beautiful and just and equal. The Bible, including Paul, friends, should be propelling us towards a more equitable and inclusive and loving posture towards our neighbor.

And any reading of the Bible that holds us back from that should be rejected and expelled as faulty and sub-Christian, not worthy of God's name.

So here's the question I want to leave you with tonight. What is your relationship with the Bible right now? Is it a source of hope? A source of joy and expectation where you come to the Bible and you know that God is going to speak words of peace and maybe occasionally words of challenge that get you out of your seat and out of your comfort zone to make this world a more beautiful place?

Or is the Bible a source of confusion and frustration and anger and hurt? And despair? Has it been used in ways to hurt you and to say you're not worthy and that you're not enough and that you don't deserve love?

Let's go back to that Frederick Douglass quote. What do we do in such a case when Scripture is used to support our oppression? Do you go and throw your Bible into the fire?

[26 : 12] Do you sing out no union with the Bible? Do you declare that a thing is bad because it's been misused abused and made bad use of?

Do you throw it away on that account? Douglass would say no you press it to your bosom all the more closely you read it all the more diligently and you prove from its pages that it is on the side of liberty and not on the side of slavery.

That's the work that we're going to be up to these next four weeks. I would encourage you to join me in that work to use Scripture and bend it towards love.

Amen. Amen. Amen.