

## HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE LESSON #3

### Teacher's Tip

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“The word written is the book out of which our evidences for heaven are fetched; it is the sea-mark which shows us the rocks of sin to avoid; it is the antidote against error and apostasy, the two-edged sword which wounds the old serpent. It is our bulwark to withstand the force of lust; like the Capitol of Rome, which was a place of strength and ammunition. The Scripture is the “tower of David,” whereon the shields of our faith hang.”<sup>1</sup>

**Outlining II Tim. 2:15:** *“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.”*

[You] Be diligent (**MANDATE**)

(**MODE**)

to present yourself approved to God

(**MODEL**)

as a workman

(**MOTIVE**)

who does not need to be ashamed,

(**METHOD**)

handling accurately the word of truth.

#### TEACHING OUTLINE:

##### THE DILIGENCE GOD REQUIRES FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

- I. THE MODE OF YOUR STUDY – (as to God)
- II. THE MODEL OF YOUR STUDY – (like a workman)
- III. THE MOTIVE OF YOUR STUDY – (unashamed)
- IV. THE METHOD OF YOUR STUDY – (accurate study)

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Watson, *How to read the Scriptures for the Most Spiritual Profit*, pg. 64.

# HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

## Lesson Three

### Cultural Customs, Word Studies, and Interpretation

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So far we have examined the importance of discovering 1) the literary type or genre of the text you are studying, 2) the historical background and context of the text you are studying, 3) the theme of the book where your text is found, 4) the outline of the book and where your text is located in that outline, 5) far context and how your text fits into the larger flow of the book and 6) near context and how your text fits into the near context both before and after your text. In this lesson we will examine the importance of cultural customs, word studies, and interpretation.

#### I. UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL CUSTOMS

The hermeneutical principle **of cultural customs** differs from the **historical context** of a passage. **Historical context** is concerned with the broad historical setting and picture. Looking at the cultural context of a passage is to seek to understand specific details mentioned within the passage that had specific meaning to the people in the culture to which the text was first written. Cultural customs are not present in every passage but in some texts cultural customs are very important. Understanding the cultural background and customs are always helpful and sometimes crucial in coming to a proper interpretation of a text.

##### A. Examples:

1. In **John 4:1-42** we read of the story of Jesus' discussion with the Samaritan woman. If a person were to study the cultural background he would find out why Jews didn't normally pass through Samaria; why Jewish men didn't talk with strange women, especially Samaritan women; and the background of conflict between Jews and Samaritans.
2. If you were studying a text which mentions Jewish weddings (e.g. the parable of the ten virgins (**Mt. 25**), the parable of the wedding feast (**Mt. 22**), or the wedding feast at Cana (**Jn. 2**), you would want to find out about Jewish wedding customs. You would want to know the details of the ceremony, the preparation, the wedding feast, and what was expected of the bride, groom, and guests who attended.
3. Cultural customs can be found in a variety of sources
  - a. Bible dictionaries
  - b. Bible encyclopedias
  - c. Manners and customs books
  - d. Good commentaries

## II. WORD STUDIES

The original languages of the Bible are Hebrew, Greek, and a little Aramaic. Translators do their best to communicate what the original language means. They try to translate the original into English word for word but some words need entire phrases, sentences, or even a paragraph to explain them. Therefore, by doing word studies you get at the meaning which a concise translation cannot achieve.

A. Word studies help you in interpretation, explanation, and application. Knowing the precise meaning of a key word or phrase helps you understand the passage better. There are many ways to do word studies. Bible software makes doing word studies very easy. If you don't have Bible Study software you can also find the information you need on line at [www.blueletterbible.org](http://www.blueletterbible.org) or [www.biblestudytools.net](http://www.biblestudytools.net). There is also the option of using books, but this is a very slow method at getting the information you need. Below we will describe how to do word studies with whatever resources you have available.

### B. Doing a Word Study

For a larger text, word studies become very difficult because there are too many words to look up. Yet even in a larger text, there may be key words that you want to understand better. For a medium sized text you might want to look up all the key verbs or action words. For a smaller text you might look up all the words that you believe might have some important meaning. Three approaches will be described below to help you understand how to do a word study.

1. **Word Studies with Bible Study Software:** All Bible study software programs have a word search feature. Depending on what software you have, you might do a search of the English word but this usually doesn't give you an accurate understanding of the Hebrew or Greek word behind the English. The key to doing a word study is to discover the meaning of the Hebrew or Greek that is translated into English. For those with no knowledge of the original languages the best way to go about doing a word study is to find the Strong's number of the word you want to study. Every word in the Bible was given a number by Augustus Strong. Strong's numbering system has become a standard and is used by many word study resources. Thus if you can get at the Strong's number of a word, even if you don't know the original languages you can still find the number and read the definitions of the word in English.

- a. You can do an Englishman's Concordance Search.
- b. You can do a Strong's Number search.
- c. You can set up most Bible software to open up your Hebrew or Greek dictionaries or Word study resources when you double click on a word or its Strong's number. In short, it is really easy to do word studies with Bible software.

2. **Doing Word Studies On Line.** There are beginning to be more and more good Bible study resources on line. At the same time there are a lot of bad ones. However two good resources are at [www.blueletterbible.org](http://www.blueletterbible.org) and [www.biblestudytools.net](http://www.biblestudytools.net). This does not mean everything that these web sites teach is good. You must always be discerning and cautious when using any resource. However both of these sites allow you to:
  - a. First, select a Bible version for Biblestudytools.net [I recommend NAS Strong's numbers or KJV Strong's numbers]. This will open up a version with the Strong's numbers by all the critical words.
  - b. Second, type in the verse you want to search and hit the enter key or select search or go. This will bring up your text with the Strong's numbers.
  - c. Once you have the Strong's number, write it down as it will come in handy later if you go to different sites that allow you to enter a Strong's number. You can then click on the Strong's number and it will bring up information for you about that word. Even online, word studies are very easy.
  
3. **Doing Word Studies With Books:**
  - a. Get an exhaustive concordance that matches the Bible version you are using for study.
  - b. Look up the word in your text that you want to study. Let's say you are studying **I John 4:10** in the New American Standard Bible and come across the word "**propitiation**". You would need a *New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance*. You look up the Word "propitiation" until you find its occurrence in **I Jn. 4:10**.
  - c. You then look at the Strong's number. If you are studying the Old Testament it will be a Hebrew Strong's number, if in the New Testament a Greek Strong's number. Often there is an "h" or "g" in front of the number to remind you where to look up the definition.
  - d. Using the Strong's number, consult the dictionary in the back of the concordance. In this case you would look in the Greek Dictionary in the back as **I Jn. 4:10** is in the New Testament. The Greek Dictionary is numbered so all you have to do is find your number in the dictionary and read the definition. This will give you a better understanding of the meaning of the word.
  - e. Consult any dictionaries, lexicons, and/or word study books you have that are keyed to the Strong's numbering system to find even more information.

- (1) Example: Using a *New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance*, you discover the Strong's number for the word "**propitiation**" in **I Jn. 4:10** to be **#2434**. You also note that the word "**propitiation**" only appears four times in the Bible, all occurrences are in the N.T., and the only other place the exact word is used is **I Jn. 4:10**.
  - (2) Looking in the back of your exhaustive concordance you discover: The actual Greek word (this is helpful even if you don't know Greek because it shows you what the word looks like in a Greek lexicon or word book coded to Strong's numbering system). You also discover the transliteration of the Greek word (how it is pronounced in English). This is helpful for the same reason above. You learn that the word propitiation comes from another similar word translated "**mercy seat and propitiation**".
  - (3) Then you consult a dictionary like *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* which also uses the Strong's numbering system (or any of the other theological word books that are keyed to Strong's numbering system) and you discover more information about the word and how it is used in the Bible. Remember, that sometimes a single Greek word may be translated multiple ways in English. So don't assume that the English word in your text is the English word used in some Dictionaries or word study books.
- f. Helpful, easy to use Word Study books:
- (1) *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, A very easy to use work coded to Strong's that uses English words and gives you definitions.
  - (2) *Vincent's Word Studies in the New Testament*, goes through the Bible verse by verse and lists key English words in the King James Bible, and gives definitions for them.
  - (3) *Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament*, like Vincent's, goes through the New Testament verse by verse, lists key words and gives you information about them.
  - (4) *Wuest's Word Studies in the Greek New Testament* is similar in form to Robertson's and Vincent's works. This is a multiple volume set that contains most of the books of the New Testament but not all of them.

- C. **WARNING!** Remember that context is what gives meaning to words, not concordances, dictionaries, lexicons, or word study books. Word study books and resources **only give you the range of possible meanings but do not always tell you how the word you are studying in your text should be translated.** Words derive their meaning from their context. This is demonstrated well by the title of Lynne Truss' book *Eats, Shoots, & Leaves*. Depending on the context, that phrase might be taken a number of different ways. If it relates to a Panda bear it would be talking of its diet. If it is talking about a hunter it might be talking about how he eats a meal, goes shooting, and then departs. What does the phrase "blew me away" mean? Does it mean there was a strong wind that literally blew me away? Or was there a terrorist bomb that exploded sending me flying? Or does it mean I was emotionally impacted by some event? Wind, bombs, and word studies can blow you away!
- D. Finally, not all passages are benefitted by word study. Sometimes a word in the Greek or Hebrew means just what it does in the English.

### III. INTERPRETATION

Interpretation is when you determine **"what God intended the biblical writer to mean by what he wrote."** Up to this point we have been **collecting data, not interpreting.** We have 1) determined the genre of the text, 2) discovered the theme of the book, 3) discovered the major outline of the book and how our text fits into the outline, 4) discovered the historical context and setting, 5) looked up any cultural details in the text, 6) examined the far context of our passage, 7) examined the near context of our passage, and 8) performed word studies on key words and phrases in the text.

We are now ready to make a **"tentative"** interpretation based on our findings. Sometimes the interpretation of a passage is very plain. Other times it may be very elusive. It is important to make a tentative interpretation **before consulting any commentaries.** If you look at commentaries first, they will load your mind with presuppositions that may hinder you from seeing the correct interpretation.

#### A. How to Interpret

1. With data accumulated so far ask yourself, "What was **the author** trying to say in this text?" **Do not ask yourself,** "What does it mean to me?" We will get to that later. Considering the context and any other additional information you have acquired, answer the question, **"What did God and the biblical writer intend for their audience to understand?"** Discover this and you discover the interpretation or meaning of the text. Write down your interpretation. Sometimes you might be torn between several interpretations. Write them all down but mentally commit to the one you like the best and the reasons why, especially taking the near context into consideration.

2. Once you have committed to a certain interpretation you think is best and fits the context best you are ready to consult commentaries.
3. After consulting commentaries you may want to modify or change your interpretation as commentators may reveal things in the text you didn't notice or may supply information that cannot be gleaned in English. Modify or change your interpretation if necessary. **Always go with the interpretation that best fits the near context.**
4. **Three basic kinds of commentaries** can be consulted. Each has its own advantages and disadvantages.
  - a. **Critical commentaries** focus on the technical aspects of the text and the original languages. Unless you have training in Hebrew and Greek these will not be helpful.
  - b. **Expositional or exegetical commentaries** are commentaries that interact with the original text but do it in such a way that the normal, person, untrained in the original languages can understand what is being said. These commentaries try to show you what the text says, what the text means, and how the text applies to life.
  - c. **Devotional commentaries** are not technical at all. They give you the interpretation and application of the text but don't discuss details of the text or problems. They are usually easy to read and application oriented.
  - d. **What Commentaries should you buy?** There are many things that could be said, but here is some basic wisdom.
    - (1) Don't ever purchase a commentary without a recommendation from someone you know and trust. Get recommendations from one of the pastors or a trusted friend. Remember, no commentary is perfect.
    - (2) If you can only get one commentary, get a good exegetical one. If you can afford several, get two or three exegetical ones and one or two devotional.
5. Example of working towards an interpretation. **Jer. 17:9** says, "*The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?*"
  - a. **Kind of book** - prophecy. In **Jer. 17:9** the prophet is prophesying (see **vs. 5**). This section of the book is written in Hebrew poetry (see how it is formatted in stanza form in most Bibles).

- b. **Historical context** - Judah is rebelling against God. The nation is about ready to be taken captive to Babylon as a judgment from God because of sin.
- c. **Theme of Jeremiah** - God's patience and holiness in dealing out judgment.
- d. **Far context/outline**
  - (1) Israel's sin (16:19-17:6)
  - (2) Blessing for trusting in God (17:7-8)
  - (3) Man's condition and God's discernment (17:9-11)
  - (4) Prayer of praise and request for the judgment of the wicked (17:12-18).
- e. **Near context** - 17:9-11 man's condition and God's discernment.
- f. **Cultural background** - none mentioned in the text
- g. **Word studies** -
  - (1) **Heart** - Man's inner emotions, volitions, thoughts and intentions (e.g. Gen. 6:5).
  - (2) **Deceitful** means - crafty, manipulative, treacherous.
  - (3) **Desperately sick** means - incurable, desperately wicked, woefully sick.
  - (4) **Who can know** means - who can narrate, indicate, announce, or know.
- h. **Interpretation** - Jeremiah is saying that man is unable to discern the wickedness of his heart. The reason for this is that it is thoroughly wicked above all else and is desperately sick with sin. It is full of deceit, craftiness, and manipulation. It is thoroughly treacherous and has a form of spiritual disease which is incurable.

#### IV. **HOMEWORK**

- A. Read the appendix at the end of this lesson entitled, "Precision, God's Will for My Life," by Dr. Robert Thomas.
- B. Apply the hermeneutical principles you have learned so far by answering the questions below. **For this lesson do not use any commentaries or books which interpret the passage for you until the very end of the lesson when it says to do so.**



C. **Read all of II Timothy**, then answer these questions:

1. What **kind or genre** is the book of **II Timothy**?
2. What is the **historical setting** of the book?
  
3. What is the **theme** of the book?
4. What are the major outline points of **II Timothy**?
  
5. What part of the general outline does **II Tim. 2:3** fit into?
  
6. Look at the theme and look at a detailed outline of the book. What are some of the sub themes in the context leading up to **II Tim. 2:3**?
  
7. What is the near preceding context before **II Tim. 2:3** talking about?
  
8. What is the following near context of **II Tim. 2:3** talking about?
  
9. What cultural information helps you understand the hardships of being a soldier in **II Tim. 2:3**?
  
10. What do word studies of the words below reveal?
  - a. Suffer

b. Hardship

c. Soldier

D. What is your interpretation of **II Tim. 2:3** before consulting commentaries?

E. Read as many commentaries as you can on **II Tim. 2:3**. Write down any key bits of information you find in them and, if necessary, refine your interpretation. If your interpretation has changed, explain how it has changed and why.

Accurate interpretation of the Scripture  
does not depend so much on education as it does on personal  
dedication to and love for the Lord.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Richards, Larry. *The Bible Reader's Companion*, Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1991, Libronix Bible Software.

**APPENDIX**  
**“Precision as God’s Will for My Life”**

Below are the slightly modified sermon notes from Dr. Robert Thomas on II Timothy 2:15. (Emphasis, bolding and italicizing, has been added to emphasize key words and statements. Having already studied the text of II Timothy 2:15 in the previous lesson, read the following sermon transcript and:

- 1) Notice *the progression* from what the text says, to what the text means, to how the text applies.
- 2) Notice the amount of *information that can be gleaned from examining the near context* of II Timothy 2:15.
- 3) Notice the amount of *information that comes from word studies and knowledge of the original languages* that cannot be seen from the English text alone.
- 4) Notice *how relevant cross references are used* so that the Scriptures might be understood better by other Scriptures which speak to the same issue.
- 5) Notice how Dr. Thomas states at times *what the text does not say or mean* in order to help clarify what is being said and the true interpretation.
- 6) Notice that though the text was first written to Timothy, a pastor of the church of Ephesus during the first century A. D., and though seminary students are never mentioned in the text, *once Dr. Thomas discovered the principles from the text he is then able to apply those principles to anyone who studies the Bible.*
- 7) Notice *how illustrations and examples are used throughout to aid in both understanding, relevance, and application of the text.*
- 8) Compare and consider what you discovered from II Timothy 2:15 with what Dr. Thomas discovered. *Consider areas you did well and areas you might need to improve.*
- 9) After reading through the notes below and making the observations suggested above, take some time to pray and ask God to help you become an “unashamed workman” in your study of the Scriptures.
- 10) Write down any other lessons you learned from reading the text below or any questions you have so that you can bring them up in class discussion.

## PRECISION AS GOD'S WILL FOR MY LIFE<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Robert Thomas: 2 Timothy 2:15

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Precision is the name of the game in many strategic phases of modern life:

- A. The people erecting block walls of the new building on campus are precisionists.
- B. Key-making is a job of precisionists. The key has to be very precisely cut or it won't work.
- C. In operating a computer every stroke has to be exactly right or the computer will not respond with the desired operation. The operator must be precise.

Consider the urgency of the need for precision in biblical matters. **2 Timothy 2:14-18** is as good a place as any for this kind of study. At **2:14** Paul moves from discussing courage to face suffering while in the ministry of the gospel to talk about the character of Timothy's teaching and of Timothy as a teacher. "**Solemnly charge them in the presence of God**"—this is strong language because purity is to be the subject of his strong adjuration (cf. **1 Timothy 5:21**). The people whom Timothy was to remind are the ones to whom he was passing on the things he heard (cf. **2:2**). "Stop word-fighting"—this is the substance of Timothy's adjuration. There are two results of such wrangling over words. The first result: it is "profitable for nothing" —"good for nothing". The second result: "the ruin (or subverting) of the hearers"—this is the opposite of edification.

Our relevant definition of precision comes from **2 Tim. 2:15**: to be so accurate in handling the word of truth as to earn divine approval as an unashamed workman. It is a Spirit-prompted impulse to want to be absolutely right in understanding and transmitting the gospel. Note several characteristics of biblical precision from this verse and its surrounding context.

### *1. The purpose of precision: purity (of doctrine)*

*People don't often go heretical all at once. And they do not do so intentionally most of the time. They slip into it through shoddiness and laziness in handling the word of truth.* Hymenaeus and Philetos (**2:17-18**) had missed the mark with regard to the truth, not through deliberate effort to propagate falsehood as some have supposed, but through lack of a sound method. The fact that they "missed the mark" (i.e. "have gone astray") implies that they had been aiming at it. The proper explanation is that they failed in the areas where Paul is commanding Timothy to excel in **2:15**.

Their heresy: interpreting the doctrine of the resurrection in an ethical or spiritual sense only: "Never mind a gospel to die by. The thing that counts is a gospel to live by, my present relationship with Christ. I died and was raised with Him when I became a Christian, and that's all that is relevant. The historical basis of this teaching doesn't matter as long as believing it helps me." This is similar to the error of **1 Corinthians 15:12** which Paul refutes. Their reasonings evidence the inroads of pagan dualism which said that everything spiritual is good and everything material is evil, and hence, the body being material will not be raised. This element of teaching later found its way into the second-century heresy of Gnosticism. Here was an attempt to integrate the Bible with a then-contemporary philosophy. Harmless? By no stretch of the imagination.

*All it takes to start the road to heresy is a craving for something new and different, a flashy new idea, along with a little laziness or carelessness or lack of precision in handling the truth of God.* All around us today are startling reminders of doctrinal slippage and outright failure. In case after case someone who should have known the truth of God better failed in upholding that truth.

The challenge that Timothy was facing in Ephesus was that of halting the slide that had ended in heresy for these two men. Others were beginning to wane under their influence (cf. "upset the faith of some," **2:18**). The beginning is to shave the edge off the truth slightly, a wrong emphasis on a correct teaching, for example. To offset this, Timothy's first job was to sharpen his own hold on the truth. Only then could he hope to have an impact for God.

### *2. The practice of precision: patience*

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<sup>3</sup>Robert Thomas is Professor of New Testament at The Master's Seminary, Sun Valley California. The above transcript was taken from a handout given to the students at The Master's Seminary chapel in 1991.

Everyone will not appreciate precision and willingly assent to its importance. We live in a world that would have us to be satisfied, in certain cases, with rough estimates, particularly when it comes to theological matters. It takes a lot of patience and “thick skin” to put up with the criticism and outright opposition that will come when God’s servant insists on accuracy. Timothy faced the same resistance in his day and Paul encouraged him to handle it with patience. Notice the language in **2:24**: “gentle”—be affable, easy to talk to, and approachable in your demeanor. Also in verse 24: “patience when wronged”—bear evil without resentment; when people are unfair and unkind, be patient towards their foolishness and tolerant of the flaws in their character. Paul continues this line in verse 25: “with gentleness” (2:25)—this is the wise man who remains meek in the face of insults, the Judge who is lenient in judgment, and the King who is wise in his rule; this quality stands in opposition to unbridled anger, harshness, brutality, and self-expression.

With 2:24-25 carrying such an emphasis upon the patience with which precision is to be practiced, the “youthful lusts” (remember, Timothy was in his late 30’s or early 40’s by now) probably refer to the qualities of partiality, intolerance, and quickness of temper that characterize headstrong people who are inclined to follow secular methods of using force to win an argument. The approach of patient teaching may very well yield positive results: note the “repentance” of 2:25. This must be repentance from novelty and false teachings and conversion to sound doctrine in this context. This is the pay-off of patience.

### 3. *The path to precision: persistence (or hard work)*

**2 Timothy 2:15** prescribes the path one must pursue to realize precision: “*be diligent*”—this term speaks of persistent zeal, eager striving, exerting oneself earnestly. It entails strenuous moral effort, a ceaseless and serious output of zeal. “Do your utmost” is the rendering someone has suggested. After you have already reached your limit and gone beyond, this is a command to push a little more to gain a better mastery.

Add to the strength of the word the absence of a conjunction to provide a transition from the previous verse and the aorist imperative form of the command, and you have a very emphatic and urgent course of action that Timothy is to adopt. This was an emergency situation! Furthermore, the needed diligence was not to be just a sporadic surge now and then, but was to cover a whole lifetime (a constative aorist). It is, of course, singular in number and addressed to Timothy alone. It reminds him that it is one thing to charge others solemnly (**2:14**), but it is another to take oneself in hand (**2:15**). Neglect of the latter will radically reduce one’s effectiveness in accomplishing the former.

“*Present*” is the same word as the one used for presenting oneself for service in **Romans 6:13-16, 12:1-2** and for judgment in **1 Corinthians 8:8**. Both ideas are involved here. The presentation is to be *to God*. Instead of canvassing for men’s approval, God’s estimate is to be sought because it is always accurate. Before the bar of God’s judgment, after thorough examination, this kind of workman stands approved. The approval of God, not men, is what counts (contrast the heterodox teachers and their ear-tickling novelties). Nothing short of conscious integrity before God will suffice. Where this is lacking, there can be no boldness in rebuking the evils of men.

“*Unashamed*”—a similar word in classical Greek referred to one who was not ashamed when he should have been. This cannot be the force here where it must refer to one who is not ashamed because he has nothing to be ashamed of, i.e., he is not forced into shame by the infallible disapproval of God. He is not incompetent or slothful in the way he performs his task, so he has no reason to apologize for his work. This is different than the shame involved earlier in **1:8, 2:3, 9** where Timothy’s shame was caused by the nature of the gospel message or Paul’s imprisonment, a shame caused by cultural pressures, an undeserved but necessary source of tension. Here it is a deserved shame because of not making use of all the resources and energies at one’s disposal, to learn the Scriptures as thoroughly as possible. The workman should never be put to shame by the quality of his own workmanship.

“*Handling accurately*”—“cutting straight,” literally. This clause carries the weight of Paul’s command to Timothy. The means by which Timothy was to satisfy the expectations set by “approved to God” and “unashamed workman,” how they were to be achieved. This contrasts with the crooked methods of chopping up the word of truth by the false teachers.

Suggested figures behind the word for “handling accurately” include: cutting material straight in making tents (Paul’s background), the work of a stone-mason cutting a stone to just the right shape, a farmer in plowing a straight furrow, or building a straight road as the word is used in **Proverbs 3:6** and **11:5**. Some look on a decision between these possible meanings as an example of the “word wars” mentioned in **2:14**, and see no need to decide between them. But as long as our motives involve precision in understanding the Scripture and not some purpose of self-vindication, it is actually an exercise in understanding the Scripture more precisely to try to decide which of these figures Paul had in mind.

**“The word of truth”**—not the 66 books as we know them, but more generally the gospel, the Christian message. “Truth” highlights the difference between God’s unshakeable revelation and the worthless chatter of the errorists. Contrast “profane babblings” of **verse 16**.

Precision, then, is a compelling desire to master the truth of God in more definitive terms, to facilitate a more accurate presentation of that truth to others and to safeguard against doctrinal slippage that leads to error and false doctrine. Seminary days are the most precise time of life for most who enter the Christian ministry. After seminary, because of ministry pressures, precision goes downhill for all but a small percentage of God’s servants. So it is important that a high standard be set while in school. Experience has proven that high goals in mastering the details of the gospel while in school lead to very fruitful ministries after training is completed.

What precision is not:

- A. perfectionism, yet it has perfection as its goal
- B. a substitute for caring for people and meeting their needs
- C. a cause for pride
- D. a clone-maker (it will not demonstrate itself in your life in exactly the same way as it does in the lives of others)
- E. a substitute for the Holy Spirit’s ministries of illumination and teaching through God’s servant
- F. an overnight achievement. It results from sustained effort and growth.

There are two contrasting articles in February 3, 1989, *Christianity Today*: One by Kenneth Kantzer about a deceased English teacher. He describes Doris Roethlisberger in this way: “She carried a permanent, militant grudge against mediocrity...Dissatisfaction is too weak a word for it—a holy revulsion against the status quo possessed her soul. She hated the second best with a perfect hatred—even when the second best was very good... ‘Work a little harder,’ she urged. ‘Press on to the very best’...She wanted students to study harder, and she told them so. She wanted good teachers to teach better, good writers to improve their skills, a good college to be a better college. Doris wanted the bricklayer to lay his bricks a little straighter; she wanted the preacher to focus on the text a little more sharply; she wanted the evangelist to communicate the gospel a little more clearly” (page 13).

The other *CT* article is written by the man whom many would consider the top missiologist [those who study missions] of this generation. He tells what’s wrong with seminaries today and what they should be doing. At the end he writes, “The goal must not be mere academic excellence. It must be Christian effectiveness.” (page 29).

Note the effect of the latter statement in the context of the whole article: “You must either be a scholar or an effective servant of Christ.” This establishes an absolutely false dichotomy through the emphasis that it brings. It is not a matter of “either...or” but “both...and.” In fact, the path to a more effective ministry is through a more thorough and painstaking attention to the Scriptures. Dr. Kantzer’s English teacher is the winner in this comparison. “*Work a little harder. Press on to the very best.*” This is the formula that will work.

There are too many “ball park” interpreters and expositors today. The theological atmosphere of evangelicalism is saturated with a dense fog of uncertainty and misplaced emphases in handling the Word of God. Many churches are on the rocks because of careless hermeneutics [Bible study principles], ignorance of biblical languages, and unsystematic theology. Rough estimates as to what this or that passage means will not do. We need qualified expositors who will take the time and make the necessary sacrifices to do their homework well and bring clarity to the minds of God’s people as they read and study God’s holy Word.