

## **Twisting the Bible**

### **By David Feddes**

Last time we were together, we talked about trusting the Bible. Today, I want to think with you about twisting the Bible. I'd like to begin with the story of the drunkard and the roses.

Once upon a time, there was a man who woke up with a headache after a night of drinking. He mumbled something to his wife. She knew that it meant to call the office and tell them that he wouldn't be coming in for work today because he was ill. She did that, and then she decided to go out with their children. She said, "Daddy's sick today, so we're going to go out for a while." So they headed out.

Meanwhile, around noon, the drunkard woke up and still had a splitting headache. So he decided he would drink a little bit more to get rid of that headache. He was out in the backyard, saw the rose bush in bloom, and decided he would do something very special for his wife. He went into the house, got a sharp knife, went back out, and grabbed a rose. A thorn poked his hand, causing it to bleed. But he didn't feel too much, so he cut it, and then he cut some more roses. Thorns poked his hands again and again. Finally, with bloody hands and an arm full of roses, he heard his wife returning with the kids.

He went out to meet them in the driveway, grabbed the kids, and hugged them with the roses. They said, "Dad, those thorns are poking us! Let go!" But he just hugged them tighter and said, "Don't you love your dear old dad?"

Then he went up to his wife, thrust the roses in her face, and poked her with them. She said, "Get away from me!"

He replied, "What's the matter? I go to all this trouble for you because I love you so much, and you don't even like it."

What's the matter? Don't women love roses? Don't kids like hugs?

"Like a thorn bush in a drunkard's hand is a proverb in the mouth of a fool" (Proverbs 26:9). Roses can be good, but the thorns are going to do a lot of damage if the wrong person is wielding those roses. Likewise, the Bible is a wonderful book, but in the wrong hands, used in the wrong way, it can cause a lot of pain and a lot of damage. A proverb in the Book of Proverbs is expected to be a very good thing, but in the mouth of a fool, those proverbs of God's wisdom can be misused in terrible ways. Then they're like waving thorns in a thorn bush and hurting people wherever you go.

The New Testament also talks about twisting the Bible. 2 Peter 3:16 says, "There are some things in Paul's letters that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures." It's possible to twist things in Paul's letters and in other parts of the Bible to the harm of other people and to your own destruction.

I want to think with you, first, about some different ways of twisting the Bible. Second, we'll look at the harm that's been done. Maybe you've been on the wrong end of having the Bible twisted, and it has hurt you. How do you respond? What do you make of the Bible when it has been used to hurt you? Third and finally, we're going to look at some principles that can lessen the likelihood of twisting the Bible and enable us to understand and apply the Bible rightly.

## Twisting

Let's begin by looking at some examples of twisting the Bible.

- Drinking
- Authority
- Discipline
- Holiness
- Grace
- Wealth
- Slavery
- Race
- Women
- Conquest

There are people with a **drinking** problem who will quote Bible passages about the value of drinking. Psalm 104:15 says "wine that gladdens the heart of man" is a gift from God. There's even a command in the New Testament: "Drink a little wine because of your bad stomach" (1 Timothy 5:23). Somehow that's twisted into a mandate for all ages to drink lots of wine because Paul told Timothy to drink a little to help him with illness and bad drinking water. Some people who drink too much appeal to the Bible and say, "Hey, wine is a gift of God! Someone was even urged in the Bible to drink a little wine. See? That justifies my drinking." Meanwhile, they ignore Bible verses that say, "Don't be drunk with wine, but be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18), or "Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise" (Proverbs 20:1).

There are Bible verses about **authority**. "Children, obey your parents" (Ephesians 6:1). "Wives, submit to your husbands" (Ephesians 5:22). "Citizens, submit to the governing authorities" (Romans 13:1). Those verses about authority have been favorites of bullies and tyrants. Rulers read a verse: "Submit to the authorities," and before you know it, they have a whole theory called the divine right of kings: the king does what he wants and answers to nobody but God. They leave out the Bible verses directed at rulers and tyrants, telling them that God will bring them down if they are mistreating their people or going against God. Some husbands say, "Yeah, I like that part about wives submitting. That means that I am always right, that whenever there's a disagreement, it's settled by me calling the shots. I really like that verse." Overbearing husbands don't mention Bible verses that say, "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25).

Some control freaks and abusers of children are experts on Bible verses about **discipline**. "Children, obey your parents," and "Don't spare the rod; make sure you use that rod and use it

plenty" (see Proverbs 13:24, 22:15). Authoritarian abusers overlook verses that say, "Fathers, don't provoke your children, lest they become discouraged" (Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21) and "Husbands, love your wives, don't be harsh with them" (Colossians 3:19). All of those Bible verses tend to get ignored. As a result, the passages about authority and discipline have often been misused in terrible, abusive ways.

Then there are passages about *holiness*. God's holiness is invoked for every little hangup. "The Bible makes it very clear that a woman shall not wear pants because you need to be holy." "The Bible makes it super clear that you should always wear a tie in church because a church is a holy place, and so those who come there should be properly attired." Some people have condemned dancing or card playing as violations against holiness. The biblical mandate for holiness is twisted to promote legalism and to condemn everything I didn't happen to approve of.

On the flip side, Bible passages about *grace* can be twisted to justify everything I ever felt like doing. "Do not judge, or you too will be judged" (Matthew 7:1) is the only verse of the Bible that some people care about. They say, "Hey, it's all grace. God is love. Love is love." So everything is grace, and we don't have to worry about anything such as holiness. There can be an imbalance or a twisting of the Bible this way and that, usually to suit our particular way of thinking.

When it comes to matters of *wealth*, rich people read Bible verses against laziness. "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider her ways and be wise... A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man" (Proverbs 6:6-11). A rich person quotes those verses to a poor person. "See, I know why you're poor: you're a lazybones, unlike me, who has worked very hard for everything I've got." So you have wealthy people quoting Bible verses about poverty, and they've decided that they know why everybody's poor. Sometimes you'll have poor people reading verses about wealth gained by oppression, and they'll say, "The reason we're poor is because there's been so much oppression and discrimination. It's all the fault of those powerful rich people, that one percent who mess things up for everybody else." Some people actually are poor because they're lazy or have addiction problems or have other issues. Some people are rich because they exploit people. But when you're reading the Bible and you happen to be lazy, you would like to blame it on the exploiters. When you read the Bible and you happen to be a bully and an oppressor who underpays all your workers and cuts corners, you'd like to credit your wealth to your wisdom and hard work and their poverty to their flaws. We tend to twist the Bible in ways that suit us and quote the verses that we like best, not the verses that would challenge us.

When it came to the matter of *slavery*, some people who enslaved others would say, "Well, the Bible says slaves, submit to your masters. What could be clearer? Slavery is a biblical practice, and we're just being biblical when we make you work our plantations. When we capture people and ship them over the oceans and make them work here, this is just being good biblical people." Left out of that were Bible verses that said, "Slave traders live contrary to the doctrine of the gospel of the blessed God" (1 Timothy 1:10-11). Or the advice to slaves, "If you can gain your freedom from slavery, do so" (1 Corinthians 7:21). The Bible makes it obvious that slavery was bad. Also, in the early centuries of the church, Chrysostom, St. Patrick, and others preached against slavery, and it was virtually eliminated from among Christians at that time in history. But people in later centuries who wanted to enslave others found their justification in the Bible.

Those who wanted to enslave people of a particular *race* also found support in the Bible. Noah uttered a curse against Canaan, the son of Ham, and said he would be a slave to his brothers (Genesis 9:25). Racists loved this verse. They claimed that black people are descendants of Ham, that Noah's curse is still on them, and that the Bible teaches that black people are lower than other races and destined by God to serve them. In reality, however, Noah's curse was on the Canaanites, who no longer exist. But racists twisted the Bible and applied the curse to any racial target they despised.

Some people claim the Bible, especially Paul, demeans *women* and take that as a reason to reject the Bible. They ignore Bible passages where Paul, supposedly the great enemy of women, greets woman after woman who was "my beloved co-worker in the gospel," or "my co-laborer in the gospel" (see Romans 16). They ignore Paul's words, "In Christ there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). They overlook passages about women being the first witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

There were also the passages about *conquest*. Some people would take verses about the conquest of Canaan on the direct orders of God and think that their own aggressive invasion of another nation or attempt to wipe somebody out was on God's command or by God's good providence. King James (of King James Bible fame) gave thanks for the plagues that were wiping out the natives in North America. It was so good of God to send those plagues so that the English could take over the continent!

These are some of the ways that the Bible has been twisted and misused. It's been misused in personal relationships and in public life. It has been misused in historic settings, whether the conquest of North America or the conquests of the Crusades. You can use the name of God and the authority of the Bible to defend many bad things.

## **Wounds**

When people are twisting the truth or hijacking the truth for their own purposes, what shall we do in response? What do we make of it when people have been harmed by people quoting the Bible to defend what they're doing?

### ***Refuse to reject the Bible.***

One response is to say, "I am sick and tired of the Bible. The Bible is a cause of problems. Religion is a cause of war in general. Maybe we'd have some peace on earth if we could just get rid of religion and get rid of the Bible."

If you discovered that someone had hijacked an airplane, what would be your solution? Would you say, "I believe that in order to prevent hijacking, we must blow up all airplanes, and there will never be another hijacking again."

If a maniac drives a car into a crowd at a parade and kills a bunch of people, would you say, "Cars are weapons of mass destruction. We're going to make sure that never happens again. We are going to obliterate all cars, and never again will anybody drive a car into a crowd."

You might not want to destroy all airplanes to prevent hijacking. You might not want to abolish all cars to prevent the misuse of cars. It might be wiser to find ways to use those things rightly and to take steps to deal with hijacking and to prevent it.

It may be tempting to reject the Bible because you were wounded by people quoting it. If you grew up with an abusive dad, and he happened to be a Bible-quoting dad at the same time, you might not be too fond of dear old dad, and you might not be too fond of the Bible. If you heard the Bible quoted against your race and to justify racism and exploitation, you might not like the racist very much, and you might not be too fond of the Bible that was quoted. If you've been offended by the behavior of Bible-quoting people, it is tempting to distance yourself from those people, and sometimes you need to. But it may also be tempting to distance yourself from the Bible itself and say, "I don't want anything to do with it." But it's not wise to abolish something good just because it's been twisted or misused.

### ***Repent of twisting the Bible.***

We know that lies are dangerous. But truth is also dangerous when it's used in the wrong hands by the wrong people. Truth is dangerous, and the greatest truth is often the most dangerous. That's why the Bible is the most dangerous book there is, because it speaks with divine authority and with such power. The Bible has been honored for so many generations that if you can get the Bible to do your dirty work, then the Bible becomes the most dangerous book there is. We need to acknowledge that fact rather than pretend, "The Bible isn't dangerous; it's completely harmless. We don't need to worry about such things."

Postmodernism is a type of current thought which doesn't look at objective truth or things being accurate or true anymore. It says everything is just a power play. According to postmodernism, people claiming to have truth are really just trying to impose their will on you. They have a will to power, and they're trying to manipulate and control others. So don't listen to anybody who claims to be bringing truth because all they're trying to do is get you to go along with their particular approach.

At one level, I think that's a bunch of hogwash. There is such a thing as truth; there is such a thing as falsehood. Yet there's a grain of truth in the postmodern idea that all claims to truth are just attempts to manipulate and impose your own power on others. Oftentimes, when you're quoting a truth, you're actually doing it to get your own way or to just get what you want and manipulate somebody else. That doesn't mean the truth you're quoting is false, but it might mean that you're using it in a very false manner. So we need to grant that.

I've read a lot of learned stuff by godly professors saying, "Postmodernism is a bunch of rot, this idea that there is no such thing as objective truth." Those are fine books. But keep in mind that sometimes postmodern accusations do have a point. Very often there is a will to power and a misuse of the truth to try to get your way.

Refuse to reject the Bible, and repent of twisting the Bible. When there are wounds that we have endured, we need to resist the temptation to reject the Bible. When there are wounds that we have caused, we need to repent of the ways that we've twisted the Bible.

### ***Relish God's love and Word.***

We need to relish God's love and relish God's Word anew. Because the Bible gets twisted, we need to be aware of the problem, but we also need to rededicate ourselves to love for God and love for Jesus, enjoying the ways that he loves us and enjoying and appreciating the fact that he has revealed himself. No matter how many times his Word gets misused, it is still the Word of the living God, and it is still filled with treasure and filled with blessing for us.

We've seen some of the ways the Bible is twisted and how to deal with wounds that have resulted from it. Examine your own heart. Ask yourself, "What ways have I been hurt by Bible quoters or by people professing to be Christians that are still affecting me today? What ways have I twisted the Bible and hurt others?" Then respond appropriately. If you've been wounded, seek healing from God, and refuse to reject the Bible. If you've hurt others, repent of twisting the Bible. Learn to relish God's love and God's Word.

Then, moving forward, avoid twisting the Bible. But how? Here are a few principles to use the Bible rightly and avoid twisting it.

### **Principles**

- Get right with God.
- Hear the whole Bible.
- Focus on Jesus.
- Apply to yourself first.
- Interact with church.
- Speak truth in love.

### ***Get right with God.***

You're never going to be able to use the Bible properly or benefit from it or help others benefit from it if you're out of touch with God. It's not enough to believe that the Bible is the truth. The Bible says God desires truth within. David wrote, "Surely I was sinful at birth; surely you desire truth in the inner parts. You teach me wisdom in the inmost place. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Psalm 51). When your heart is wrong, it's impossible to be right in your use of the Bible.

We've looked at Proverbs 26:9 about a proverb in the mouth of a fool. A bit later it says, "As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool returns to its folly" (Proverbs 26:11). The dog pukes and then decides that would make a nice meal. That's the picture of the fool. A dog is a dog, and a fool is a fool. Unless their nature changes, they will keep returning to their folly. A person with an unregenerate heart isn't born again, so they can't handle God's truth rightly.

The next verse says, "Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him" (Proverbs 26:12). The greatest danger in Proverbs is thinking you already know everything. A person who's already wise in his own eyes is bound to go wrong.

We need a new heart and a new spirit. If we have not been born again by faith in the Lord Jesus, we end up not getting the Bible right and not trusting. We need truth in the inner parts. The dog needs to not be a dog anymore. It's not just enough for the dog to be told, "Naughty, naughty." He needs an entirely new nature; he needs to become a non-dog in order to no longer eat his own vomit. You and I need to be a non-rebel against God to even begin to listen to God's Word.

### ***Hear the whole Bible.***

Many of the problems in twisting the Bible come from listening to one isolated verse that I happen to like, and taking it out of context. You listen to a verse about grace or "Judge not that you be not judged," and you take it to mean you can do whatever you want without any accountability or bad consequences. You ignore all God's warnings and Jesus' warnings of his wrath, of his punishment against sin, and the need for grace to actually change who we are.

We need to hear the whole Bible and not just little snippets that seem to suit me here and now. As we listen to the whole Bible, we need to listen to the words of grace *and* the words of judgment. We need to listen to the words about hard work *and* the words about generosity and not exploiting the poor and listen to the full range of what the Bible says to rich and poor and everybody in between.

When we listen to the Bible, we need to be hearing the whole Bible. That's why, among other things, it's important to follow a Bible reading plan where you read through the Bible and not just flip it open now and then to the verses that you happen to like. A wider reading of the Bible will help you to hear the whole Bible.

Another way to hear the whole Bible more fully is to pay attention to the major creeds and confessions of the church. These summarize some of the most important truths of the Bible. They were produced by great councils of many, many Christian leaders coming together and determining those things. Creeds and confessions help you to get the big picture and the major truths and doctrines and ethical teachings of the Bible. Hearing the whole Bible means: read it all repeatedly year after year in your personal devotions, but also be listening to great summaries of the faith.

### ***Focus on Jesus.***

This is the heart of it all: focus on Jesus. Jesus said to some of his opponents who happened to be religious and who eventually killed him, "You search the scriptures, and you think that in them you have eternal life, but it is they that bear testimony to me" (John 5:39). So when you read the Bible, the supreme question always is, "What is this telling me about Jesus? How is Jesus speaking to me?"

The Bible is given to fill your heart with faith in Jesus. It's given to fill your mind with thoughts of Jesus. It's given to fill your life with the character of Jesus. If you're using it for totally different purposes than that, you're likely to get way off track. Is your heart being strengthened with faith in Jesus, your mind with thoughts of Jesus, your life with the character of Jesus? That is the heart of why the Bible and the entire gospel is given to us.

So focus on Jesus when you read your Bible. As you do that, be talking to him: "Jesus, I'm about to read this Word, and I know that it is meant to lead me to you. So let it do so. Speak to me right now. Help me to understand you." Let prayer be at the very core of your approach to the Bible.

### ***Apply to yourself first.***

A fourth principle: apply the Bible first to yourself and to your own situation long before you wield it against somebody else whom you might be in disagreement with.

Before you parents quote the Bible to your kids, "Honor your father and your mother," you first ask, "What would it mean for me to be an honorable mom or dad?" Not, first of all, "Junior, you honor me or else!" Look in the mirror and say, "Why would Junior honor me, besides the command of God? Is there something that God has given me and is leading me into that would make it a lot easier for my children to honor me?"

If you're children, you might think you're experts on how Mom and Dad could be better parents. "If only moms and dads would get a clue, I could obey them, but they are so dense that it's better to ignore them." If you're a child, you need to hear God's Word to boys and girls before you try to figure out what a good parent should do. It is possible that your parents are very flawed. But it's also possible that mom and dad are actually right! Allow for that possibility, and then ask yourself, "What is God saying to me when it says to obey my mom and dad or to honor them?"

The same principle applies in relation to government. We're very quick to criticize and very slow to heed those in authority. Maybe we should first learn to obey the Bible's command to obey people in authority before we quote Bible verses criticizing authorities.

Whatever our situation, we need to apply the Bible to ourselves first and ask, "God, what are you saying to me?" Only then can you ask what the Bible says to somebody else. As Jesus put it, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you'll see to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:3-5). First, get rid of the thing that you need to deal with before trying to be an expert on straightening out somebody else. Apply what the Bible says to yourself first. Remember the principle of the plank and the speck.

You may say, "But they're the ones with the plank! I only have a speck." Maybe, but just remember, in our own distorted ways of thinking, another person's problem always looks like a plank, and our own problem always seems like a little teeny tiny itty-bitty speck to us. We don't have a very good sense of proportion. So if you're aware of even a speck in your own life, just realize that it might actually be a log in relation to other people or in relation to God. Deal with your own problem first. Apply the Bible to yourself first before you try to help somebody else fix what's wrong with them.

### ***Interact with the church.***

A fifth important principle to use the Bible rightly is to interact with the church, to be part of a local community. They help you, and you help them.

Some of the most whacked out things I've come across in my ministry appear in the lives of people who couldn't ever find a church good enough for them, so they were always off on their own. When you're on your own, you do some really nutty stuff. If you were in relationship with other people and talking with them, they could help you keep your head on straight. If you misused the Bible to defend something whacky, people in a good church would say, "That is just crazy! What are you thinking?" A healthy church provides mutual accountability and correction.

With online communities, you can find just about any community you're looking for. That's an advantage; it's also a disadvantage, because you can find on the internet any kind of lunacy and a group that'll support such lunacy.

When I urge you to interact with the church, you must choose the church carefully because there are religious groups that will help reinforce what's wrong with you already. Find a healthy church that preaches the truth. That's an important part of your growth in understanding the Bible. Reading the Word on your own is absolutely vital, but it's also vital to listen to preaching of the Word by someone called and gifted to preach, as well as listening to brothers and sisters in Bible studies who are talking to you about the Word.

Study the whole Word, but don't just do it on your own, because you're going to have your own weirdness and idiosyncrasies and agendas that might run away with the Bible and make you an abuser of the Bible unless you have some people that can help you. Part of interacting with the church is interacting with the particular local body that you're part of, but another key part is to learn what the church around the world and throughout the centuries has understood the Bible to mean.

If you did that on the matter of slavery, you would find that the church in many civilizations and in many eras was very strongly against slavery when almost nobody else was. You would find that the church was standing for a healthy treatment of women and the dignity of women and protecting the lives of widows when many other civilizations weren't doing so. You would find, if you study the historic church, where it stands on what marriage is. Every generation of the church and nearly every church around the world, up until the last few decades, has held the same understanding of what marriage is: a lifelong monogamous union of a man and a woman.

To interact with the church in many different settings is to say, "If the church spoke with almost one voice in almost every era in almost every civilization, I'm guessing that that's probably what the Bible does mean." The church's authority is not a substitute for the Bible. But if a lot of godly people in a lot of different places and a lot of different times were reading the same Bible you read and came to a different conclusion than you do, guess who's most likely to be wrong.

That's why it's usually not wise to say, as some people do, "No creed but Christ, no confession but the Bible." Yes, Christ is supreme, and the Bible is the ultimate source of authority. But if you say, "I'm going to ignore all the thought of people studying the Bible for the last two thousand years and all the thought of those in various countries around the world today who are studying the Bible, and I'm going to listen only to my own view of what I think it says," well, good luck with that. It doesn't work well. If you are your only authority on what the Bible means, you usually end up way off track.

## **Speak the truth in love.**

Finally, love. The Bible says, "Speaking the truth in love, we will grow up into him who is the head, which is Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 4:15). Truth wielded as a club against people can often do more harm than good, but truth spoken in love, truth spoken in the spirit of Jesus Christ, can bring tremendous blessing

When we think about God's gift of the Bible, let's again trust the Bible because it is God's Word. "Every word of God is flawless" (Proverbs 30:5). "All Scripture is given by inspiration from God" (2 Timothy 3:16). Biblical authors "spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). The Bible is supremely worth trusting, and therefore it's also supremely important that we avoid twisting it and that we instead speak the truth in love until we grow up into him who is the head, our Lord Jesus Christ.

## **Prayer**

Thank you, Father, for your precious book. Thank you for the Holy Spirit who inspired each writing in this book. We pray for your Holy Spirit to guide us in the way of Jesus, that we may follow you, that you will give us the new heart which only the Holy Spirit can give, that you will open our ears to the entire body of your truth, that you will always do, Holy Spirit, what you have promised to do: to bring glory to Jesus by taking from what is his and making it ours. Help us, Father, to have that Spirit working in our heart and convicting us where we need convicting, where the Bible can reveal to us and teach us, rebuke us, correct us, and train us in righteousness. Help us to apply it to ourselves.

Father, help this congregation to be a body of truth and love that is worth belonging to, that is a place where the truth flourishes and where love grows and prospers, where your people support one another, where they also have the love and the courage to correct each other where needed. We pray that our church will be a manifestation of your great universal church, which is true to you, the church throughout the ages, the church around the world that is faithful. Help us learn more and more to grow into our Lord Jesus and to grow in the stature of those who've learned from all of the church throughout the generations. Help us, Lord, to speak truth in love.

Help us never to fall to the temptation to reject the Bible because of how it's been twisted by others. Free us from ways that we distort its meaning ourselves. Help us again to treasure and trust this book and not to twist it, but to use it for your honor and glory and for our blessing and the blessing of others. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

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**Slide Contents**  
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