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<http://www.fbcweb.org/doctrines.html>

### **Personal Study of the Bible-41 (1 Thessalonians 5:16-22: 8 more spiritual virtues)**

We are now in step five of the six fundamental principles for personal Bible study of Paul's epistles:

1. Read the epistle *straight through* at one setting;
2. Notice the setting of the epistle;
3. Study the introduction of the epistle;
4. Notice the outline of the epistle from the introduction;
5. Make a *verse-by-verse* study of the epistle;
6. Meditate upon and *digest* the *results* of your study.

In our verse-by-verse study of 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15, we noted seven virtues:

1. Respect pastors who have charge over you,
2. Admonish troublemakers in the church,
3. Encourage the fainthearted,
4. Help the weak,
5. Be patient with everyone
6. Never repay evil for evil
7. Always seek that which is good for fellow believers and for all people.

There certainly is a lot more to the Christian way of life than simply taking in more and more doctrine. The goal of true Christianity is virtue, which means excellence in character, Christian character. This is progressive sanctification, temporal salvation over the evil influences of the sin nature, i.e. a bad character, a character filled with vice. Furthermore, you do not need to understand the original languages to understand the basic nature of the virtues above.

Note in step six in the first paragraph above: *meditate upon and digest the results of your study*. This is where virtue is really developed. Not only that, this is where you really become a true Bible believer. Understand: there is a vast difference between a believer who only or chiefly meditates on the studies of others, like pastor-teachers, and those who really meditate on their personal studies of the Bible itself. God never designed Christianity to be a system in which all or mostly all that believers meditate on is teaching from their pastor-teachers. To be explicit: God's plan for the believer was never for him simply to listen to Bible tapes daily wherein the believer's dominate view of Christianity and the Christian life is almost exclusively formed by one or more pastor-teachers. This is not the Christianity of the Bible.

Don't misunderstand me. You should meditate on the truths that your pastor digs out for you, but that is in addition or in conjunction with being rooted in the Word of God yourself. In other words, your view of God and Christianity should be formed by your personal understanding of the Word of God. What the pastor teaches should always be *aids* in helping you

understand the Word of God, not in replacing it. He is here to help you understand the truths in the Bible. Here is a great maxim for all believers: *the Bible should be the only book you read in order to understand and believe whereas all other books and sermons you only read or listen to to consider if you believe them.* Again, the pastor-teacher is a gift to the church to help believers understand their bibles. He was never designed to replace their bibles. I am afraid way too many Christians these days spend far less time meditating on their own bibles and far more time thinking about what others teach. The results is that they have no solid biblical framework. Who is more likely to be led astray? A believer who only meditates on what their favorite pastor teaches or the believer who meditates on the Word of God and *then* benefits from supplemental teachings of pastors on the truths of Scripture? A believer who benefits primarily from personal understanding of the Bible that is supplemented by teaching pastors or a believer who receives no benefit from personal study of the Bible because they *only* listen to pastors teach the Bible?

In our step five of personal Bible study, let's note the next set of virtues in 1 Thessalonians. Read verses 16-22 and note the eight virtues:

1. Rejoice always
2. Pray without ceasing.
3. In everything gives thanks.
4. Do not quench the Spirit.
5. Do not despise prophetic utterances.
6. Examine everything carefully.
7. Hold fast to that which is good.
8. Abstain from every form of evil.

While understanding the Greek is going to be helpful in some of these virtues, you do not need to know Greek to understand these concepts on a basic level. You know what rejoicing, praying, thankfulness, going against the Holy Spirit, despising prophecy, examining all things, holding fast to the good, and staying away from evil means on basic conceptual levels. I would argue that deep and proper understanding of these concepts is not really attained by the original languages. Rather, it is gained by metaphysics and philosophical realism.

A word of caution, as a Realist you need to be philosophically discerning when someone is exegeting the Word of God. You need to really pay attention to the difference between what the exegesis of a word entails and what it does not entail. The thing I want you to be aware of is the danger of listening to someone exegete a biblical word who then follows up that exegesis with principles that cannot really be deduced from that word. As a Realist, you need to be philosophically astute about truth as such. Another word of caution when listening to someone exegete the Word of God is to watch out for the informal fallacy that uses what is known as a strawman fallacy. There are various ways this can be used by pastors who teach believers that they cannot understand their Bibles. How this is used is that a person's position (e.g., someone who thinks they can read and understand the Bible for himself) is distorted, exaggerated and misrepresented in order to tear down the position. An example of this would be a pastor exegeting the Greek word for hope (ἐλπίς) and pointing out that the English word hope does not mean wishful thinking and how the Greek makes it clear that it refers to confidence. Hence, the believer who thinks that he can read the Bible is going to be all mixed up when he reads "hope."

However, all one has to do is pick up any English dictionary and see that the *English* word does refer to hope as an eager anticipation—you can quickly see this for yourself by clicking this link: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/hope>. As a matter of fact one could look at Greek lexicon on hope and English dictionary on hope and see very similar patterns because of the realities the word points to is that which to which all human natures resonate. Furthermore, the believer who really understands the Bible will know the nature of hope by how it is used throughout the Word of God: it is constantly used for confidence.

I am not denying that knowing the original languages is important for the pastor. However, what I am denying is that without the original languages the believer cannot understand the Word of God. I categorically reject that view. I do not believe that there is a single mistranslated word in your Bible which cannot be corrected by a thorough personal knowledge of the Bible. If anyone can show me just one word that is mistranslated and would lead to a false view of God, Christ, or the Christian way of life—a false view that would not be self-correcting by other passages, I would appreciate it. Just one, please!

Another example of strawman argument that could be used to exaggerate the position of a English reader of the Bible who thinks he can understand the Bible on his own is with the phrase in our set of virtues, “pray without ceasing” (*ἀδιαλείπτως*). One who knew the Greek could tell believers that unless they knew the original, then they could misunderstand this command and think that the believer must be praying every single second every single day for the rest of his life. However, a Realist (which I hope most of you are becoming) would realize that one does not need to know Greek to understand that “without ceasing” does not necessarily entail continuous (non-stop) activity, rather only continual (iterative, regular) activity. Besides the believer who was a Realist and grounded in the Word would realize that this word is also found earlier in this epistle in 1:2 and 2:13 (I will show you how to discover this on your own when we get to hermeneutics) where it does not mean every second of every day with no interruption—surely Paul slept and thought about other things from time to time than just the Thessalonians.

The point is not that you do not need a pastor to help you understand many things about the Bible and Reality as such. The point is that you need to first and foremost understand the Bible for yourself. Again, the pastor is nothing but an aid. The Bible should be established in your soul first and foremost. The pastor can help you do that. But, again, he was never designed to replace your personal understanding of the Word of God.

In the next lesson, I will go over the eight virtues above. First, they need to be established in your soul. Then the pastor can come in and help you unpack them. First you need to understand the content and structure of the Bible and the Christian way of life, then the pastor can help fill in details. This is the only way to stay tethered to God’s Word instead of any man. Given the choice between personally understanding your Bible for yourself with the pastors help from time to time or not understanding the greatest and only book God has given to you but understanding a pastor’s emphases, why would you or anyone ever pick a pastor over the Word of God?

*In ‘Ehyeh,  
Pastor Don Hargrove*