

Defending the Bible, Pt. 2—It is Consistent
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Our summer sermon series is a bit different, and I'm gonna have to keep the pace up with it this morning. We may go a little bit over because we went a little over on the song here, 'cause this is not stuff I can cut back very much; so I'm gonna prepare you for that right as we start. Because what we're doin' is tryin' to address areas that...where our faith gets challenged. It isn't our typical working through passages of scripture. What we're doin' is saying...we did a survey last spring and we asked you where do you get...where does your faith get challenged? What are the ideas that confront your faith and kinda create doubt, that get you caught in that place called kind of where you're between two minds, belief and unbelief, because something's been said to you and you wonder 'Wow, do I really believe this or not?' And so we've been looking at some of those challenges to your faith, not in a classroom setting like an apologetics or working through a textbook. We did a survey and started with the issues that you get confronted with, and we're trying to just work our way through those throughout the summer months.

And the one we're working on with right now relates to this particular book, the Bible. It's actually a collection of sixty-six books, sixty-six different books written over a period of fifteen- sixteen hundred years by over forty different authors, and all different settings and situations, and collected into one volume and divided into two—Old Testament and New Testament. It's a book that we take, as Christians, as authoritative in our lives and our practice, and our understanding of God, and the reality that we live in our relationship with Him. And it's foundational to us as Christians. But not everyone believes that. In fact many look at the Bible, that book that is so foundational to us; and the challenge that is raised, the thing we're confronted with, is the statement that the Bible is man-made and contradictory, that it's simply man's opinions and if you read through it you're gonna find that it contradicts itself many different times. And many of us get confronted with that statement. Sometimes we wrestle with that when we're reading a difficult passage of Scripture; within our own minds we're wondering, 'Man, is this really from God? Is this contradictory of something else I read?' But then there's other people—at work, at school, our friends, our family—that raise this question and they struggle with this. And we wrestle with it. In fact, this past week a retired minister in our community, writing an editorial or an opinion page in the newspaper, he wrote this. This is a minister in our community. He says,

"The Bible materials were written over a period of about a thousand years and were collected and revised by a long succession of editors and redactors [people that kept tweaking with it]."

And then he says in there,

"Differing opinions are presented and radically different faces are put on God. The books of the Bible contain inaccuracies and contradictions. More and more serious students of the Bible are reaching those conclusions."

That's a minister in our community writing in the newspaper. So that's not an uncommon challenge to our Christian faith. We hear it all the time. The question is how do we respond to that? And our response—we started to address this last week—takes two steps. We say, for the first part of our response, is that we believe the Bible is God-breathed; that there is something unusual about this book; that God's Spirit was working in and through those writers. He honored their style, their vocabulary, and everything else, but He was in there and He was communicating truth through them. And so we speak of it as God-breathed, or inspired revelation from God, through all these different writers over that period of time. And we dealt with that last week. We ran through the ten different reasons that we feel that way and we believe that way. Nine of 'em I indicate are just kind of pointers in that direction. The tenth one to me is a real clincher with respect to this book.

Today we're gonna move on to that other question in terms about its consistency. People say it's full of contradictions. That's the phrase I hear most often. People will dismiss it and will say it's full of contradictions. And my reply is no, it's not. It's remarkable consistent. But there's a caveat here. There's a qualification I wanna make. Not only God-breathed, it's consistent *when read rightly*—when read rightly. See, the Bible needs to be treated in a right fashion. And I don't ask here for special treatment, just the right way you would treat any other book. Treat it rightly and you'll find that it is remarkably consistent. Again, not asking for special treatment. Just treat it rightly.

One of my...I mean, I can see where people look at it and they say, 'Man, there *are* contradictions.' Maybe apparent contradictions. For example (we looked at some of these last week) you have the statement that 'Boy, fracture for fracture,' and then the part we always remember,

...eye for eye, tooth for tooth; just as he has injured a man so shall it be done to him. Lev.24:20

And then we have this statement by Jesus,

"...whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also." Matt.5:39

I mean, that doesn't sound like eye-for-an-eye. Or then you have the theology statements such as this one here, where the Apostle Paul is writing and he says

...a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. Romans 3:28

And about the same time another writer by the name of James, writing in the church at Jerusalem, writes this statement. He says

...a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone. James 3:24

You sit there and say, 'Whoa! This sounds like a clash right there.' And then you have those instances where you have a report of something happening, and the details seem to differ. It says, for example, in Matthew Jesus is coming to a place and it describes an incident where two men who were demon-possessed met Him as they were coming out of the tombs. And we read the same account in the gospel of Luke, and we're told that simply He was met by a man from the city who was possessed by demons, and it's describing the same incident. You say ok, well this seems like a clash here. What's going on? So yes, we read it and there are some apparent contradictions. But again I go back to *read rightly it's remarkably consistent.*

The question is what do we mean by 'read rightly'? And I'm gonna...I wanna approach that. At the start of our time today the thing I wanna focus on is if we're dealin' with these contradictions, or apparent contradictions, how do you read 'em in a way that makes sense out of it? We just treat it like we would any other book, but I'm gonna start with a verse that has been formative for me. In fact, this is a verse that has been foundational to my entire career as a pastor. It's one of those directional verses. See, the Apostle Paul, near the end of his ministry, he's writing to a younger minister and he's giving him instruction on how this younger pastor is supposed to go about his duties as a pastor. And one of the statements he makes to Timothy—Paul, this old, old minister that's nearing his death, writing to this young pastor—he makes this statement to him. He says to Timothy,

Be diligent...

...take painstaking effort...

... to present yourself approved to God...

...not to the people around you, but to God...

...as a workman who does not need to be ashamed,

...that doesn't need to be embarrassed about the work you're doing. And then here's the key statement...

...accurately handling the word of truth. 2 Timothy 2:15

Accurately handling the word of truth...it could almost be translated, 'cutting it right,' or 'being straight with it.' And the passages, the verses around, warn Timothy against getting involved in wrangling over words or chattering over legends and myths. The challenge is 'hey, you deal accurately with the truth.' See, there's a right way and there's a wrong way to work with the Scriptures. The challenge is to do it rightly.

Another part of this verse that is just crucial to my understanding and my whole approach to the ministry is this word right here (points to the screen and the word 'workman')—it's work to handle it rightly. It is work. We're not talking about some intellectual games; we're not talking about sitting over coffee and philosophizing. We are talking about work, and the word 'diligent' applies to it. Pastors aren't called to be great orators. They're not called

to be creative communicators. The challenge in the pastoral work is to be a 'roll-up-your-sleeves' workman who puts in the diligence to handle the truth accurately. That's the pastoral call. It's not fancy. It's hard work.

I never...I don't think I've ever done this with you. What I wanna do is take a few minutes and walk you through what I believe needs to be done—the work, the diligent work that needs to be done—if you're gonna arrive at an accurate interpretation and handle the Word accurately. It starts with a very distinct and definite target and goal in mind, and this comes from a man named Gordon Fee, an excellent scholar who...you can get really technical in this area. You can talk about words like exegesis and hermeneutics and that sort of stuff. And I'm just gonna go with a very basic description from a very definite quality writer who has an ability to take complicated words and just make it straightforward. And that's what we're gonna do here today. And the basic goal whenever you handle the word of truth is you wanna get at the author's original intent. What did *he* mean by what he said? If you don't aim for that you're gonna miss the truth that is there. It's not about what I *think* he meant; it's not what I think he *should* be saying; it's not what I *wish* he would be saying; I wanna know what was his intent when he used that particular word. What was his intended meaning? That's the goal, and it will not suffice for a group of people to sit around and say, 'Well, this means this to me, and this means that to me,' and somebody else says, 'No, it really means this to me.' What I wanna know is what did Paul mean when he said that. What did he mean? And until I've arrived at that, I am not handling the Word accurately yet.

So how do you get at that? And it's a challenge because we're dealin' with a book two thousand years old that covers many...in a different culture, with different languages...I mean, it is not like sitting down and talking to somebody that you're on immediate wavelength with because you grew up in the same area, read the same books. So how do you do it?

The first thing you do is you wrestle with questions of context, its setting. And as you go through there the first—and this is one of the most important—you look at what is called the genre, the type of literature you're dealing with. The Bible is made up of a wide variety of literature. There is poetry, there is narrative, there's proverbial sayings, there's prophetic visions, there's gospel narratives, there's essays, there's letters, there's poems, there's hymns, there's drama. It's all types of literature; and unless you recognize, as you move from type of literature to type of literature, that they need to be handled differently, you will make inaccurate interpretations. You handle proverbial sayings very differently, *very* differently, than you handle Paul's epistles. You handle a gospel narrative very differently, *very* differently, than you handle a psalm. And you have to recognize the type of literature you're dealing with.

One of the most critical things you need to understand is when you're dealin' with biblical literature you're dealing with *ancient* literature. For example, in the area of history ancients had a different and a very definite approach to the way they wrote history, and it is very different from the way we write history in our day. And if you try to read ancient history using the techniques of modern historians, it won't cover for you. You have to understand what they were doing when *they* wrote history, understand it, and appreciate it for the way they wrote it. You have to start with recognizing the style of literature you're dealing with; then you look at the historical setting, you look at the general setting—where are they in history, who was in control, what is happening in terms of the environment and the culture, what is happening with society at that time, what are the dominant belief systems—all those sorts of things. And then you have to look at the specific historical context—what was happening to this individual that is writing? In his setting in life, what was happening? Is he in prison or is he in a palace? What is going on in his situation? You look at the historical context.

Then you have to look at the literary context. You study the flow of the argument and you see where does your passage and your statement fit within that. Is this his lead thematic statement, or is this a side digression? Is this the pinnacle of the narrative, the crucial pivot point, or is this just a detail leading up to the central theme of the idea? Is this written as motivational? Is this written as instructional? What is the function of it? What is the design of it? You need to understand the literary structure and where your passage fits in it.

That's dealin' with context. Then you have to move on to questions of what I call content. You've just gotten a feel for the lay of the land, where your text is. Now you have to deal with the actual text itself. And the first thing you gotta do is make sure you're dealin' with the original text. You review the textual history—the copying that went on, the transmission of that text—and you ensure that what you're looking at is a good copy, a good reflection, an accurate rendition of what Paul actually wrote. You're not looking at a paraphrase. You're not looking at a legend that was inserted. You know you're going back to the words of Paul. And once you identify that you're dealing with actual New Testament writing, or the original writings of that author or whatever, Old or New Testament, then you start wrestling with the meaning of the words—whether they're Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, you start wrestling with what do these words actually mean. And you have to pay attention; Paul used words differently than James. You

have to pay attention that over hundreds of years words will change their meaning. Think of English that were spoken in two hundred years-three hundred years ago in England, and how their meanings have changed in our modern day. Well, over the course of biblical history words changed in some of their nuances and meanings over two thousand...or fifteen hundred years. You read a word in Moses, you better make sure you understand what it meant by the time Paul used that word. So you wrestle with the meaning of the words.

And then, yes, you work with the grammar, because words only make sense as they're connected to other words. I have an English teacher who's long dead, but I've often thought what she would ever think if she saw me now—diagramming sentences in my office. I don't talk about this often. But taking a Greek sentence and deciding what's the participle, and what sort of participle is it, and how does it link to the lead verb, and how does that connect to the conjunction that links to the paragraph in front—and I'll diagram it out on graph paper to try to figure it out. Grammar makes a huge difference.

And then there's the historical background. You say 'you already talked about historical context.' This is something a little different. What we're talking about here is if there's a historical reference in that material, do you understand what that reference is to. If Paul mentions something about the temple, do you have an understanding of the temple he's talking about?

I don't like going through this. Number one, people can get where they lose confidence in their ability to read the Scriptures and they start saying, 'Boy, unless I know the genre and the literary context I can't read this.' Yes, you can. It's very much like...in Alaska you can go on some great hikes. You can do some great ridge walking. But I tell you what, if you're going to climb Denali you're going to have to step it up. And there's a lot of places in Scripture you can just read, but there's a lot of places that, unless you roll up your sleeves and you become a diligent workman, you will not—you *will not*—handle it rightly. You will not; you will not.

When I go through that steps, and I go through thirty years of working through the text like that, I walk away and I feel like when I read the Scriptures, we are dealing...read rightly, the Bible is remarkably, remarkably consistent. I'll hear people say it is full of contradictions and I wanna look back at 'em and say, "Have you read it?" I'll see a headline on a website—"One hundred and forty-one Bible Contradictions." A book written over sixteen hundred years by forty different authors and many different cultures and settings, and all you can find is a hundred and forty-one apparent contradictions? Don't tell me it's full of contradictions. If that's all you can find, just with a headline you've told me it's remarkably consistent. This one—"...eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth..." versus "...turn the other cheek..."—the first one is written by Moses as judicial instructions for the law of the land in ancient Israel to help them in terms of their justice system. The second is a personal instruction of Jesus to His disciples on how to respond in personal relationships and reactions. Two very different settings and purposes behind the statements. You take this particular one, the lines of argument in both passages are dealing with different issues, and they're nuanced with different terms. James used the words differently than Paul did when you look at it, but they are both headed in the same direction. The Apostle Paul is sayin' faith and faith alone is what makes the difference. James is coming back and sayin' in another way, 'Yes, I agree, but a faith that doesn't produce works is nothing, it's dead, it doesn't save anybody.' And you'll find, if you continue to read on in Paul that he agrees exactly with that statement, and he will say faith that does not produce love is useless. It won't save anybody. It's not a contradiction.

Now, as you go on through you're gonna find areas of mystery. They're gonna have things like the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as one. And I look at that and I can't put it all together, but that's mystery. God's sovereignty and man's free will—how that meshes, to me, is mystery. There's a humility you have to bring to the text. We're dealing with God and guess what? God is bigger than we can understand! You have to understand—when we work with truth and we work with the biblical scriptures, it's a little bit at times as if we're trying to solve a crossword puzzle and we don't have the full vocabulary. We can't fill in every blank. That's the way it is. The Bible is very emphatic. "We know in part..." and if you're not willing to say, "I don't know" as you work with Scripture, you will not interpret it accurately. There will be points you stop and say, "I don't know."

There's instances of multiple viewpoints, almost like a court case where witnesses are brought in, and one says, "I saw a person here," and the other one comes in and says, "I saw two people." Their vantage point, and what they saw, is what gives the different witnesses. In fact, if you're dealing with eye-witness testimony and everybody comes in repeating the very same details and exactly the same order and exact correlation, you're sitting there saying, "This is not eyewitness testimony. This is a story people have been taught to repeat." If it's eye-witness testimony there is going to be differences, just like in a court case listening to people that saw the accident from different angles. The incident we talked about earlier, about Jesus and the demoniacs is explainable that way. One of 'em did most of the talking—that's the one one noticed.

You've gotta be careful when dealing with these. A contradiction is a statement that denies another, that directly denies another. An eyewitness testimony—things'll collaborate without denying. You sort that out.

There's also, and I gotta keep the pace up, there's errors in transmission. We do not have the original copies of the Old and New Testament, those books; we do not have the originals. Throughout the centuries that have followed there have been times when people have tweaked the text. In fact, there's been times when they've inserted things in the text. The amazing thing is with the research and the data and the copies that we have available, it is very easy to identify those points and deal with 'em. In fact, the more I study textual transmission, the greater confidence I have in the copies that we have and the ability to identify any problems that are in there.

And then there's some that I just say I'm still mullin' over. Two verses that I'm wondering how do they actually fit. I've seen explanations and I can accept most of the explanations, but there's still in the back of my mind, I wonder exactly how. The key thing here is the issue of attitude. You hit biblical contradictions on Google, you'll get 279,000 hits. When you look at those you're gonna find that they're polarized. Some people are screaming that the Bible is full of contradictions. Others over here are screaming "Absolutely not! There's not one single contradiction in it!" And you've got it totally polarized each way. There's an attitudinal issue that's very much to the fore here when you deal with this issue. Some people approach the Bible and all they're doin' is lookin' for contradictions. "I see one! I see one! I see one!" And they are gonna see contradictions anywhere and everywhere they can. There's another approach that says, "You know what? I'm gonna listen for how these things harmonize, how they mesh, how different notes on a chord will make a similar sound and mesh together. I'm gonna listen for harmony." That's an attitudinal difference. I want you to know up front that I take the approach of listening for harmony, so that even when I have two verses that I'm not sure how they fit, I will be patient with them and wait 'til I figure out how they fit, without panic. It's a bias on my part, and I will be very straight with that. My bias is to look for harmony, not contradiction.

Now I need to defend why I listen for harmony. Follow me close right here for the next five minutes. I'm convinced that the gospels provide a reliable record of what Jesus said and did. Does that have a familiar echo to you? I am absolutely convinced that the Bible provides a reliable record of what Jesus said and did, that that historical data collected in those New Testament documents called the New Testament, the gospels, provide accurate historical picture of what Jesus said and did. I'm convinced of that. I'm not even claiming they're inspired here; I'm not even claiming that there's no contradictions there. I'm claiming they're accurate historical data you can rely on. When I read that record of what Jesus said and did, in those records, that historical documentation, it convinces me that He is someone to be trusted. I'm absolutely convinced of that when I read the record.

Following up on that, I recognize when I read what He said and did that for Him, the Scriptures were of God. He had a high regard for the Scriptures. In fact, He submitted His life to them. He followed them as His command as to what He would say and do. And as a result, I will approach the Scriptures with reverence, and I will listen for the harmony.

The key issue is right here, the statement that the gospels provide a reliable record of what Jesus said and did. Intellectually, when you wrestle with Christianity this is the central issue intellectually. This is it, right there. And if you're in two minds over that issue—'Does this really give us a picture of what Jesus said and did? I mean, it talks about Him walkin' on water, feedin' the millions, thousands, bein' raised from the dead...is that really accurate, true history?' And you're in two minds about that and you doubt it, my response is this. This is the key question to pursue from that point. If you're in two minds about it, you ask the question and you keep asking this question—if the gospels are not a reliable record of what Jesus said and did, then what are they? And you need to press that question. You need to ask, and you need to research, and you need to press the explanation that comes back most often, that what we have in the gospels is a persistent legend that just never went away. Or the argument that what we have in the gospels is a religious reconstruct where church leaders, over the years, began to grab things that would support their particular theological view and put 'em together in these documents. Or you got the idea that what we got here is a deliberate hoax. That one never held water very long. And then you got the stuff of recent novels and movies, that we have a coded conspiracy. You got those...those are your major views. The legendary one is the one that is put forward the most.

If you're in two minds, not only do you need to examine what the Christian faith says, and say, 'Are these really reliable, historical documents' and put 'em through the grid of how you analyze historical documents, you need to do that; at the same time you must doubt your doubts. And if you will not doubt your doubts and put them through the same grid of demand that you'll put upon the Christian position, then you are not dealing with the issue with integrity. You have to press yourself on this. If you are gonna say it is simply legend, then you better research how

legends develop, how they're put together, how they're written, how they came in that culture, and see if the biblical data fits what history teaches about the development of legends. I can't say this strong enough.

On the back side of Denali right now I'm tracking a climbing team. They're just now at this spot in the climb called Carsten's Ridge. It's the crux of the climb. They've had objective hazards all along the way so far. There's glacier crevasses they've had to work around, and they've been able to do that. There's a river to cross, and they find a place they can ford it. If it's too deep they go down further. They see an avalanche zone. They can get around it. Weather camps in on 'em, and they can just hunker down and wait. But you know what? When they come to Carsten's Ridge they have to go over it. And it's the most technical part of anything they'll do. It's called the crux. The summit is easy compared to this. They have to latch the ropes to the mountain; they have to latch themselves to their ropes; they have to latch themselves to one another; and they creep over that ridge.

The crux of Christianity, the crux of our faith, is whether or not those gospels give us an accurate record of Jesus. And you test that to the utmost. You get as technical as you need to be. The summit—seeing the full glory and wonder of Jesus and our God—that'll come later. You need to deal with this crux if you're in doubt. And don't just simply say, "I can't believe it." Tell me what you do believe about those documents.

I'll ask you to stand with me. You've been patient as we worked through this. This is lengthy material. It isn't just intellectual issues. It's not just dealing with questions of history, and literature, and all that. There has to be a dynamic here, and we wanna close by praying in that direction.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Go in that truth, and enjoy that grace. Amen.