

## **Lesson 3: Discernment in Selecting Bible Study Material**

### **Purpose of a Bible Study**

The purpose of a Bible study is to grow spiritually. We are told in 2 Peter 3:17-18 to “be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

In today’s world, the word “spiritual” is often misused or has been redefined to mean nothing more than an emotional, self-defined human-divine relationship. This is not the type of spiritual growth we are talking about. Rather, we seek to learn more and more about the true God revealed to us in the Bible. Through this type of spiritual growth, the blessings of the Holy Spirit, both in terms of faith and the fruits of faith, expand to fill our lives. As we learn more about God’s unfathomable love for us, we learn to depend on his promises and the comfort and courage they give us. As we search the Scriptures we develop a devotion to God that becomes intimately linked to every aspect of our lives. This continual growth is the goal of a Bible study.

God has given us his Holy Word and has told us to search and study, putting into practice what we learn. He has also given gifts of writing, encouragement, understanding and teaching to some of his people. Through their gifts we can learn more about the Bible and how to apply its teachings to our lives. This also is valuable in our path of spiritual growth though their words will always be secondary to the Bible. Like the Bereans (Acts 17), we must hold those who write or speak about Scripture to a very high standard so that what they say does not add to God’s Word, misrepresent it, or overlook important parts of it.

### **Bible Study Material with Integrity**

All spiritual material written by humans will come with differing theologies. God has blessed the WELS tremendously by giving us highly trained pastors and professors who have spent many years in study of Scripture. They provide us with excellent material that properly represents God’s message of the Bible. We can be confident, when using their material or that produced by people under their tutelage, that it is theologically accurate. Men and women from other denominations have also been blessed by God as they produce theologically accurate material and this is beneficial for our use.

Using material that contains errors, is weak or is flawed in its presentation can be dangerous. God has warned us in Romans 16:17 “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.”

As we purchase Bible study material, we must be discerning of the content or we may inadvertently weaken our faith rather than strengthen it. Following are some points to be considered.

Negatives to watch for:

1. I pursue God and/or find him, rather than vice versa
2. Personal experience or opinion is the criterion for truth rather than Scripture alone
3. Living a perfect life is possible this side of glory

4. I can make myself worthy to God
5. I can find God aside from his written Word (e.g., intuition, experience, meditation)
6. I can find God through 10-step or other self-help plans popularly used to overcome bad habits
7. Manmade standards that burden the conscience
8. Scripture is reduced to a formula to secure earthly success, health or happiness
9. The focus is on me and how I feel rather than on God and what he has done for me
10. God is limited to what I can understand or reason

Positives to look for:

1. Proper distinction between law and gospel, and inclusion of both
2. Justification is by grace – God alone declares us righteous and changes our status from condemned to acquitted; justification is complete and universal (available to everyone); justification is a free gift, given to us through faith
3. Sanctification (holy living) is possible only as a consequence of our justification
4. We are all sinful by nature and unable to reach out to God apart from the Holy Spirit
5. Grace is always the unmerited favor and forgiving love of God
6. Incarnation, redemption, forgiveness and reconciliation are central to the message
7. Faith and the fruits of faith are created and maintained by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace (the Bible, Baptism and Holy Communion)
8. The relationship I have with God, through the merits of his Son, is the foundation for all other relationships

Through our study of God's Word, God changes our attitudes, ethics, relationships and even our character. With joy we read Romans 12:2 "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." Whenever and wherever the Word of the Lord is expressed and accurately reflected, we trust that the Holy Spirit will bless us.

**Reference:** Bivens, Forrest L, Using Devotional Classics. Available on the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary website at <http://www.wlssays.net/node/2040>

