

How to Study the Bible – Week 4 – The People Factor – Bible Study Helps

Title: Whose Mail Is This?

Sermon Summary: This sermon, part of an ongoing Wednesday night series on how to study the Bible, addresses one of the most foundational yet overlooked principles of biblical interpretation: the people factor. Using the analogy of a neighborhood mailbox, the sermon teaches that while the entire Bible is written for every believer's benefit and learning, not every passage is directly addressed to the church. God divides humanity in Scripture into three distinct groups -- Jews, Gentiles, and the church -- and understanding which group a given passage is written to is essential for rightly dividing the word of truth. The sermon warns that failing to apply this principle leads to false doctrine, misapplied promises, and the kind of scriptural distortion that Jesus himself condemned in the letters to the churches in Revelation. The sermon affirms that all Scripture is profitable and should be read and loved, but insists that proper application requires first identifying the audience of any given passage.

Key Points:

- Every word in the Bible is written to a particular audience, and readers must ask "whose mail is this?" before applying a passage to their own lives
- God divides mankind in Scripture into three groups: Jews, Gentiles, and the church, as seen clearly in 1 Corinthians 10:32
- The entire Bible is written for the believer's benefit and learning, but not all of it is written directly to the church-age believer
- Not every promise in the Bible belongs to the church; promises must be understood in light of who they were originally addressed to
- The Bible itself identifies the author and audience of nearly every book, especially in the New Testament, making this kind of study accessible
- The church's primary mail is found in the Pauline epistles, Romans through Philemon, written by the apostle to the Gentiles to saved believers in the church age
- Books such as James, 1 and 2 Peter, and Hebrews are written to Jewish audiences and must be understood in that context before application is drawn
- Matthew is a Jewish gospel presenting Jesus as King, and passages like the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24 are addressed to Jewish disciples in a tribulation period context, not to the church
- Misapplying Jewish mail to the church is the root of many false doctrines, including charismatic sign gifts, baptismal regeneration, Catholic replacement theology, and Mormon promises
- Jesus warned in Revelation 2 and 3 that those who claim Jewish identity and inheritance without biblical warrant are of the synagogue of Satan, a serious condemnation of those who steal and misuse Scripture addressed to Israel

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Scripture Reference:

- 2 Timothy 2:15, the command to rightly divide the word of truth, serves as the headline verse for the series
- John 16:13, where Jesus promises that the Spirit of truth will guide believers into all truth
- 1 Corinthians 10:32, which lists Jews, Gentiles, and the church as the three distinct people groups God addresses
- 2 Timothy 3:16, affirming that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable
- Romans 15:4, stating that Old Testament scriptures were written for the learning and hope of believers
- 1 Corinthians 10:1-11, where Paul uses Old Testament examples as warnings and instruction for the church
- Ephesians 2:8-9, affirming salvation by grace through faith and not by works
- James 1:1, addressed to the twelve tribes scattered abroad
- 1 Peter 1:1 and 1:18-23, written to Jewish believers scattered throughout various regions
- Matthew 24:13-15, describing tribulation period events and the need to endure to the end
- Hebrews 3:14, used by some to argue against eternal security but understood in its Jewish context
- Revelation 2:9 and 3:9, Jesus condemning those who say they are Jews and are not, calling them the synagogue of Satan

Stories:

- The mailbox illustration serves as the central parable of the sermon: a neighborhood cul-de-sac with separate mailboxes for Jews, Gentiles, and the church represents how God has addressed different portions of Scripture to different groups, and just as it is a federal crime to open or steal a neighbor's mail, wrongly claiming another group's biblical promises leads to serious spiritual error
- The out-of-context illustration uses Matthew 27:5, describing Judas hanging himself, followed by Luke 10:37, "go thou and do likewise," to demonstrate how dangerous and absurd it is to rip verses from their context
- The account of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 is referenced to show that even the Jewish apostles were initially unaware that God intended to save Gentiles, illustrating how distinct the three people groups were in the early church
- The future tribulation period scenario is described as a narrative illustration, in which Jews left behind after the rapture will turn to books like Hebrews and James, finding in them a pathway to faith in Christ during the end times

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Discipleship Questions

The sermon draws a distinction between Scripture being written 'for' you versus written 'to' you -- how does understanding this difference change the way you approach your daily Bible reading and the promises you claim as your own?

The sermon describes the book of James as being addressed to the twelve tribes scattered abroad, yet acknowledges it yields practical benefit for church-age believers -- how do you personally navigate the difference between direct application and indirect application when studying a passage?

John 16:13 promises that the Spirit of truth will guide believers into all truth -- in what ways have you experienced the Holy Spirit correcting a misunderstanding you held about a passage of Scripture?

The sermon argues that Matthew 24 is a Jewish gospel written in a tribulation period context and should not be used to undermine the doctrine of eternal security -- how does knowing the original audience of a passage reshape your confidence in doctrines you have held for a long time?

The sermon uses the illustration of stolen mail carrying federal penalties to make the point that misappropriating Scripture has serious spiritual consequences -- where do you think the line is between making a legitimate application from another group's portion of Scripture and crossing into dangerous misuse?

Jesus Christ twice identifies people who 'say they are Jews and are not' as belonging to the synagogue of Satan -- what does this sobering warning reveal about the eternal stakes involved in correctly handling and dividing the word of God?

The sermon teaches that the entire Bible is profitable for learning even when it is not directly addressed to the church -- how does this principle guard against the temptation to neglect large portions of Scripture such as the Old Testament or the Hebrew epistles?

The sermon points out that Paul's letter to the Ephesians is addressed to a local church rather than to individual believers, and uses this to challenge erroneous Calvinist interpretations of Ephesians 1 -- how does the corporate versus individual dimension of a letter's audience affect your interpretation of difficult theological passages?

The sermon identifies several religious movements, including Catholicism, Pentecostalism, and the Church of Christ, as taking Jewish or tribulation-period mail and applying it to themselves -- how should a believer lovingly but clearly engage someone from one of these traditions who challenges them with a passage taken out of its proper context?

The sermon closes by previewing a Sunday morning text about Saul searching for lost donkeys and asking what God could possibly teach through such a detail -- what does this approach to ordinary or obscure biblical narratives suggest about the kind of patience and attentiveness required to grow as a serious student of Scripture?

Small Group Guide: Whose Mail Is This?

Based on a Sermon on Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

Overview

This session explores one of the foundational principles of Bible study: understanding who the Bible is written to. Just as you would not open your neighbor's mail and claim it as your own, not every passage in the Bible is directly addressed to the church-age believer. Learning to ask "whose mail is this?" unlocks deeper, more accurate understanding of Scripture and guards against false teaching.

Key Verse

2 Timothy 2:15 — Paul instructs believers to study in a way that correctly handles the word of truth, being workers who have no reason for shame before God.

Key Takeaways

1. The entire Bible is written for you, but not all of the Bible is written to you.
 2. God addresses three distinct groups of people throughout Scripture: Jews, Gentiles, and the church.
 3. All Scripture is profitable, but profitable does not mean directly applicable in the same way to every reader.
 4. Almost every New Testament letter identifies its author and its audience in the opening verse, giving readers immediate context.
 5. Wrongly applying Scripture — taking someone else's mail — is not a minor mistake. It is the foundation of most false teaching and religious error.
 6. Before asking what a passage means for your life, you must first ask who it was written to and what was happening in that context.
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Discussion Questions

Opening the Conversation

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1. Before this sermon, had you ever thought about the Bible as a collection of mail addressed to different groups of people? What was your initial reaction to that idea?
 2. Have you ever received someone else's mail by mistake? What did you do with it? How does that experience connect to what we are learning about Bible study?
 3. The sermon mentioned a humorous example using Matthew 27:5 and Luke 10:37 taken completely out of context. Why do you think people often read Bible verses in isolation without considering the surrounding passage or the broader book?
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Going Deeper

4. The three groups the Bible addresses are Jews, Gentiles, and the church. Before this sermon, did you think about those distinctions when reading Scripture? How might recognizing those groups change the way you read certain books of the Bible?
 5. The sermon said the entire Bible is profitable, even the parts not directly addressed to the church. How have you personally benefited from reading books like Genesis, Psalms, or the Gospels, even though they were not written specifically to church-age believers?
 6. James 1:1 addresses the twelve tribes scattered abroad. Does knowing that context change the way you read the book of James? Does it make the book less meaningful to you, or does it give you a richer appreciation for it?
 7. Matthew 24 is often used to argue against the security of the believer. Knowing that Jesus is speaking to Jewish disciples about tribulation period events, how does that context help you respond to that argument?
 8. The sermon pointed out that almost every New Testament letter opens by naming the author and the audience. Why do you think so many people skip those opening verses when reading Scripture?
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Examining False Teaching

9. The sermon named several religious groups — including charismatic and Pentecostal movements, the Catholic Church, the Church of Christ, and Mormonism — as examples of groups that take Jewish promises or practices and apply them to themselves. How does understanding the people factor help you evaluate the claims of these or other religious groups?
 10. Revelation 2:9 and 3:9 record Jesus warning about those who say they are Jews and are not. In your own words, what do you think Jesus meant by that warning, and how does it connect to the danger of wrongly dividing Scripture?
 11. Why do you think Satan's strategy involves using the Bible rather than simply ignoring it? What does that tell us about the importance of knowing how to study Scripture correctly?
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Personal Reflection

12. Is there a verse or passage you have claimed as a personal promise that you might now need to re-examine in light of the people factor? How does that make you feel, and how does it change your approach?
 13. The pastor said that learning this truth made him initially nervous, wondering whether he had been misapplying other people's mail. Have you had a similar moment of uncertainty when learning something new about Bible study? How did you work through it?
 14. How does understanding the people factor actually strengthen your confidence in the Bible rather than weaken it?
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Practical Applications

This Week, Choose One or More of the Following:

- Open your Bible to the beginning of a New Testament book you have not studied closely. Write down the author and the audience identified in the opening verse. Then ask yourself: is this written to Jews, Gentiles, or the church? How does that affect the way you read the first chapter?
 - Read through the book of James in one sitting with the understanding that it was written to Jewish believers who were scattered. Note any passages that now make more sense in that context, and note any passages that still offer strong application to your own life.
 - The next time someone quotes a Bible verse to challenge something you believe, practice asking: what book is this from, who wrote it, and who was it written to? Make this a habit in your personal Bible reading as well.
 - Make a simple chart with three columns labeled Jews, Gentiles, and the Church. As you read through the New Testament over the coming weeks, place each book or letter into the appropriate column based on the opening verses. Discuss your findings next meeting.
 - Review your notes from previous sessions and consider how the people factor connects to the other principles already covered.
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Closing Thought for Group Leaders

Remind your group that the goal of this principle is not to shrink the Bible or make people feel they have been reading it wrong. The goal is to read it better. Every part of Scripture reveals who God is, how He works, and what He values. The people factor simply helps us understand what God is doing in each section, with whom, and why — so that when we draw application for our own lives, we are standing on solid ground rather than borrowed mail.

Close your time in prayer, asking God to give each member a growing love for His word and a hunger to handle it with care and accuracy.

5-Day Bible Reading and Devotional Guide

Rightly Dividing the Word: Knowing God Through His Book

Day 1: The Spirit Who Guides You Into All Truth

Reading: John 16:12-15; 2 Timothy 2:15

Devotional: God did not leave you to figure out His Word alone. The Holy Spirit, the very author of Scripture, lives inside every believer and serves as a personal guide into truth. This is not a small promise. The God who wrote the Book also lives within you to explain it. Studying the Bible is therefore never a purely intellectual exercise. It is a spiritual conversation. Come to Scripture with humility, ask the Spirit to lead you, and commit to the hard work of rightly dividing what God has said. A workman who handles truth carefully never has reason for shame.

Reflection: Are you approaching Bible study as a spiritual discipline or merely an academic habit? Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your reading today.

Practical Application: Before opening your Bible this week, pause and pray specifically for the Spirit's guidance. Make this a daily practice rather than an occasional one.

Day 2: All Scripture Is Profitable

Reading: 2 Timothy 3:14-17; Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:1-11

Devotional: Every word in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, carries weight and value. God did not include filler. The Old Testament histories, the Jewish prophecies, the warnings given to Israel, all of it was written so that you might learn, find hope, and avoid the errors of those who came before. Profitable does not mean identical in application, but it does mean nothing is wasted. When you read of Israel's failures in the wilderness, you are reading a warning written with you in mind. God's Word is a complete library of wisdom, and every section of it points you toward Him.

Reflection: Which portions of Scripture do you tend to skip or dismiss? What might you be missing by avoiding them?

Practical Application: Choose one Old Testament book you have never fully read and begin it this week, looking for the principles and warnings God preserved there for your benefit.

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Day 3: Whose Mail Is This?

Reading: 1 Corinthians 10:31-32; James 1:1; Ephesians 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1

Devotional: God is a precise communicator. When He speaks in Scripture, He addresses specific people in specific circumstances for specific purposes. Recognizing who the original audience is does not diminish the Bible. It actually deepens your understanding of it. When you know that a letter was written to scattered Jewish believers, or to a local Gentile church, or to a pastor ordering his congregation, you begin to see how carefully God arranged His revelation. Context is not an obstacle to faith. It is the very road that leads you to accurate, trustworthy, life-changing truth. Ask every time you open the Bible: who is speaking, and to whom?

Reflection: Have you ever claimed a biblical promise without first asking whether it was written to you? How does understanding the original audience change your reading?

Practical Application: The next time you study a passage, identify the author and the audience before drawing any personal application. Let context shape your conclusions.

Day 4: The Church's Mail

Reading: Ephesians 1:1-7; Romans 8:1; Ephesians 2:8-9

Devotional: The letters Paul wrote to the churches are your mail. They are addressed to saints, to those who have been saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, placed into the body of Christ, and sealed by the Holy Spirit. These letters contain your doctrine, your identity, your standing before God, and your instructions for daily life. You are not under condemnation. You are not earning your salvation. You are not enduring to some uncertain end hoping you measure up. You are in Christ, and what God says about those in Christ is your inheritance. Read Paul's letters and receive what God has addressed directly to you.

Reflection: Do you live as though you truly believe what God has spoken over the church in Christ? What promise from Paul's letters do you need to receive more fully today?

Practical Application: Read through Ephesians chapters 1 through 3 in one sitting this week. Write down every statement God makes about who you are in Christ and keep that list somewhere visible.

Day 5: Handling Truth Carefully in a World of Confusion

Reading: 2 Timothy 2:15; Revelation 2:9; Galatians 4:16; 2 Peter 3:16-17

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Devotional: The stakes of rightly dividing Scripture are not merely academic. False teachers have always twisted the Word of God, taking passages out of context, applying Jewish promises to themselves, and leading people away from the grace of the gospel. Peter warned that the untaught and unstable distort Scripture to their own destruction. The answer is not to distrust the Bible. The answer is to study it carefully, consistently, and honestly. A believer who knows whose mail is whose, who understands context, audience, and rightly divided truth, is not easily deceived. God gave you a perfect Book and a perfect Guide. Use both with diligence and reverence.

Reflection: Where in your life have you accepted a teaching simply because someone quoted a Bible verse, without examining the context yourself? How will you approach Scripture differently going forward?

Practical Application: Identify one doctrine you hold and trace it back to its source in Scripture. Confirm that the passages you rely on are written to the church and interpreted within their proper context. Let the Word itself confirm what you believe.