

Sift wk. 6 Sift to Stay on Track

Intro

I'm so excited as we wrap up our "Sift" series this week. And today, I want to start by showing you my little friend here.

We have been exploring how to sift the media, news, words, beliefs, and actions from all around us through the sieve/the sifter of Scripture so that we can know the actual truth about reality.

When we sift in this way...

- we learn who God is
- who we are
- what the purpose of life is
- what happens when we die
- how we can know who and what to trust in life.

Jesus said in *John 8:32*

and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

We don't want to be deceived by a unicorn princess, or Mormons knocking on our door, or the news, or what our friends post on Instagram, or what our favorite influencers say on TikTok or YouTube. We don't want to be "tossed like waves and every wind of teaching" like Ephesians 4 tells us.

And this is where I want to jump back into the book 2 Peter. Because today we are going to learn how to identify a false teaching or a counterfeit truth in a super practical way.

YOU need to sift

2 Peter 1:12-21 pg. 590

12 Therefore I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have. 13 I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder, 14 since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me. 15 And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.

16 For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. 17 For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," 18 we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. 19 And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, 20 knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. 21 For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

What is Peter desperately warning the early church about? Essentially, he's saying, "Anyone who comes along and makes a new claim with their own special authority about the new undiscovered truth of who God is, who we are, or our purpose—be skeptical. Test it with the Bible because the truths of the Bible are not going to change until "the Day dawns." AKA: When Jesus returns. Truth (capitol T!) does not change. So, watch out for people trying to say it does".

However, I want to be super clear! I am not your sieve/sifter.

- I want you to check everything I say with the Bible.
- I want you to ask questions.
- I want you to wrestle with doubts and what you believe and why.
- I want you to be truth seekers who use your rational brains to find actual answers to life's biggest questions.
- There are many philosophical, scientific, rational, and faith-informed reasons why I believe what I do as a Christian.
- But you need to do the hard work on your own in order to own your faith.
- Be a critical thinker. Don't come to conclusions based on what culture tells you or your feelings.
- Make your decision based on what is true.

2 Corinthians 10:5

We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,

That's what we need to do. When deep thoughts come into our minds, we simply need to take just a second to examine them. And so today, we are going to think about how to identify if a preacher, church, or group is speaking the truth from the Bible or if they are giving a heretical or false teaching.

Stay on “the track”

The first thing we need if we are going to stay gospel-centered and not drift into fundamentalism and legalism, or on the other side, let go of our biblical convictions and become lukewarm, we need to:

1. Know Theology

There are many churches, preachers, and groups, however, that are cults. And there are different religions, too, that seem legit and are hyper convinced that they represent truth. They are believable, but they are not what we would call orthodox (right-believing) Christians. They take some essentials of the Christian faith and twist them sometimes just by a few degrees. And it’s this twisting that makes them not good news at all.

The first way we can identify if a belief system is legitimately Christian, is by knowing theology.

Theology = “the study of God.” It’s knowing big truths of our faith *and* where to back them up in the Bible.

For example, Christians believe that Jesus was both fully God and fully man. There are so many cults and religions that believe Jesus was just a man, just God’s son but not equal with God, or that He is God but was not fully man when He died on the cross. Do you have any verses memorized that you could pull up if you were asked about this?

Let me just give you one to write down: *John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”*

Another big one: many churches fall off from rightly interpreted Scripture when they subtly or subliminally claim that our salvation is through participating in certain rituals, or by doing good works. Again, they twist certain Scriptures, and they miss the good news, the main point of our faith, which is that it is by grace that we have been saved through faith in Jesus Christ not through works. Do you know any verses that back this up?

Ephesians 2:8-9

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

These are just brief examples of why we need to know theology.

[Leader Note: Tell a quick story here about a moment you realized you needed to know theology. It could be about a conversation with a friend who had a lot of questions or was a part of a different religion or church or when you started questioning what you believe.]

2. Recognize False Teaching

We cannot learn to identify a “heresy,” cult, or false teacher without knowing the truth. If we know the gospel and we know the Bible, we will recognize when someone uses

- A different source: The leader may offer a different source for where they have found the truth. This could be another sacred text, another angel, or another prophet.
- A different Message: The leader may distort Christian teachings. For example, saying God is not a “trinity” (three in one) meaning they think God the Father, God the Son, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are multiple gods, or that they are not equal is a “different message.” They might also bring a different message for salvation. Jesus + _____ = salvation. It could be good works, certain rituals, following the rules perfectly, etc.

False teaching also tends to elevate secondary teachings.[1] And sometimes make them more important than primary teachings. And possibly then they make up new teachings.

Some examples of this would be

- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (or the Mormons). Joseph Smith was their leader who, not until the 1800s (almost 2,000 years after Jesus lived by the way), elevated 1 Corinthians 6:19 that says, “our bodies are a temple” to mean that all Christians should not drink coffee, tea, or alcohol. He then made a health code that Mormon’s consider scripture called “the Word of Wisdom” in their “Doctrine and Covenants.”
- They have created many new teachings that are also not in the Bible and made them “scriptures.” For example, they believe all people were spirit children before being born on Earth. This just simply is not in the Bible nor has the Bible been changed to add any “new revelation” like the Mormon scriptures. Yet, they market themselves as another “Christian denomination.”
- The Seventh Day Adventists claim that Jesus’ human nature was affected by sin and that he was like Adam after the fall but just was able to keep Himself from sinning.
- Some other “different messages” claim that people today can have apostolic or prophetic authority, meaning people need to follow the teachings of a particular person rather than simply Jesus.

Also, if a “Christian” church or group or leader says that they are the only true church and people in all other churches are lost, you need to get out.

3. Be critical of different positions

The last way to recognize if someone is drifting from the gospel and the Bible is if they have a different position. And I don't mean they just have different political opinions than you (unless they are elevating those above Jesus). I mean, if they read the Bible in a way that is based on the culture, their desires, and reject hundreds of years of rigorous academic interpretation.

- One example of this is the "prosperity gospel," which is a common belief system that masquerades as Christianity today. The prosperity gospel puts an emphasis on the pursuit of health and wealth. It says that God wants you to make you rich, promises you no pain, and if only you offer enough positive thinking and say enough positive affirmations out loud and believe it enough, whatever you want will happen. Guys, the American Dream is not the gospel. This has "New Age" influences.
- Where the prosperity gospel says, "Live your best life now!" Jesus said in Mark 10 to "sell everything to get the hidden treasure." (God himself).
- Then, there are the Christian Universalists and the Church of Christian Science. Both are not compatible with Christianity.
 - Christian Universalist believe that all people will be saved and restored to a right relationship with God.
 - The Church of Christian Science takes a position that instead of seeking medical care when ill, they should be solely prayed for instead. They also believe that heaven and hell are not places but states of being we make for ourselves.
- "Progressive Christianity" which is also a different religion because it does not hold a high view of Scripture. Progressive Christians do not think the Bible is the authoritative Word of God. They take bits and pieces that they like—for example, Jesus loves us—and they change anything that doesn't feel culturally relevant to them, as in rejecting God's design for sexuality as found in the Scriptures. Many local churches are leaving the United Methodist Church because it has taken an unbiblical view of human sexuality.
- And finally, another way Christianity is easily distorted is by placing a focus on self-improvement. This type of thinking can go like this: "I need to be better, try harder, and adhere more strictly to my beliefs, that is what the Bible is really talking about. That's how I am going to be a good Christian." This is not the good news of Jesus.

Disagreement vs Heresy

It is important to point out that not every disagreement in the church is heresy. We read in the Bible, that the apostles even disagreed with each other at times. There is clear biblical teaching which we would call “essentials” and then there are “non-essentials.” I can think of there being three categories for Christian doctrines.

Essentials—These are the basic beliefs that if we don’t believe them, it’s not a Christian church. These are...

- Jesus’ divinity and humanity (including His virgin birth)
- Jesus’ bodily resurrection
- Salvation through Jesus alone by grace and not works
- The Trinity - One God in 3 persons
- The inerrancy and authority of scripture

Non-Essential Disagreements—Then there are doctrines that you may disagree about with other believers and you may need to go to another church because it would affect the way you minister there. These disagreements are based on the different, yet sincere, interpretation of scripture. These disagreements are non-essential. For example, baptizing infants or adults, gender roles in the Church, interpretations about spiritual gifts, etc. Christians that believe in the essentials can disagree and separate due to non-essential disagreements on interpreting scripture.

Non-Essential Preferences—And then there are non-essentials that you shouldn’t change churches over. You should just agree to disagree—like how the end times will happen, the age of the Earth, the appropriate style of music in the church, and other things related to personal preference. Christians should not separate based on preferences. Unity and sacrificial love should be more important than personal preference.

Landing

Many people take a little from here and a little from there, a bit of this, and a bit of that to make up their own worldview.[3] If someone adopts beliefs from other religions, this is called syncretism. Instead of seeking truth, they form beliefs based upon feelings and preferences.

This entire series has sought to show you that you should investigate what is true and not just accept whatever you hear or what is popular.

- Wrestle with the whys
- Think for yourself
- Take steps to know why you believe what you do and start owning your faith
- Seek out the truth about who Jesus claimed to be and who He is. Sift!
- Recognize that every ounce of information you consume daily needs to be examined.
- I contend you should be using the sieve of the Bible.

I have some incredible resources that can help you with the Christianity side of rational and faith-driven belief if you are interested.

Remember what Peter said in 2 Peter 3:18,

“So be on guard; then you will not be carried away by the errors of these wicked people and lose your own secure footing. Rather, you must grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. All glory to him, both now and forever! Amen.”

[1] <https://africa.thegospelcoalition.org/video/how-to-spot-a-christian-cult/>

[2] <https://www.crossway.org/articles/never-cast-out/>

[3] https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CRC_AWVI2021_Release01_Digital_01_20210413.pdf

Small Group Material

Series Goal: In this series we want to help students learn to sift through our culture's distorted version of reality to uncover the truth. Addressing commonly held beliefs of our day, we will challenge students to use the Bible as their sieve, as they build their worldview. We do all of this in love, welcoming questions and doubts as they take steps to own their faith. Our heart is to also encourage students to love others well, even as they disagree with their friend's conclusions. This is a worldview, theology, apologetics, and identity series wrapped into one—addressing hard to talk about topics in a way that is both faithful to a high view of Scripture, but also with the winsomeness necessarily to reach the lost.

Scriptures: 2 Peter 1:12-21, John 8:32, 2 Corinthians 10:5, 2 Peter 3:18

Get To Know Your Group: Spend 5 minutes or so continuing to get to know each other as a group!

Small Group Questions:

- What have you learned these past six weeks about worldview? How do you form a biblical worldview that can withstand cultural changes and hard circumstances in life?
- What does it mean to sift? How have you begun to filter the opinions you hear and read, the media you consume, and the things you have always thought through the sieve of Scripture?
- How have you or seen someone you know “syncretize” your worldview from a smorgasbord of belief systems?
- In what ways has this series brought up question and/or doubts?
- In what ways has this series help deepen your faith?
- How have you been challenged to seek out the truth and not just adopt beliefs that are culturally accepted or feel good?
- Why do you think well-meaning people get deceived by belief systems that are bizarre?
- How do you think people get deceived by beliefs that only veer slightly off traditional Christian teachings?
- Have a student read 2 Corinthians 10:5. How are you going to need this verse in your life?
- How well would you say that you understand “theology?” For example, the “doctrines” of Jesus being fully God and fully man, the Trinity, sin, salvation, the authority of the Bible, salvation by grace through faith, etc.?
- What can you do to increase your understanding of theology?
- What belief systems of your friends, family members, teachers, or online have you experienced that have a different source, different message, or different position on essential beliefs than the Christian faith?
- How can you know which issues are essential and non-essential? How will you decide what ministries to be a part of in college or what church you will attend?
- Have 3 students read 1 Corinthians 16:14, Colossians 4:2-6, and John 13:35
 - What do these verses show us about how to interact with non-Christians or those that have different beliefs than us?
 - How have you focused on arguing people into the kingdom of God instead of showing and speaking the gospel to them in love?
 - How have you been silent when you should have spoken up for the gospel?
- What is your next step moving forward in your faith journey? How can we support you? What doubts and questions do we still need to discuss?