

An Epistemological Framework from John 8:31-32

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ABSTRACT

Christians can be equipped with the proper tools for knowing and understanding God and His creation. By using specific scriptures found in John 8:31-32 an epistemological framework emerges that finds practical application for all Christians when coupled with Mark 12:30. The three-part epistemological framework consists of believing in Jesus, abiding in the word, and knowing the truth. Practical application can be found through loving the Lord with all one's heart, mind, and soul.

Keywords: Epistemology; Ways of Knowing; Biblical Epistemology

INTRODUCTION

A proper epistemology is necessary for understanding the world that God created. Anastas (2002) states that epistemology matters in research, teaching, and how one approaches most substantive areas in life. Naugle (n.d.) contrasts modern epistemology which is informational and detached with Biblical epistemology which links knowledge, experience, and submission to the word of God. Crawford and Ghormley (1999) point to three concepts that are necessary for a Biblical epistemology: natural man possesses valid and actual knowledge, he does reason *a posteriori* to arrive at valid conclusions about his own self-consciousness and cognitive faculties, and he perceives actual knowledge about God. While numerous theories of epistemology have been researched, this

article aims to focus on a biblical framework for practical epistemological application rather than a specific theory, or theories, of knowledge. Some definitions need to be discussed before a biblical framework can be presented.

Main (2023) defines epistemology as the theory of knowledge. Hofer and Pintrich (1997) state that epistemology is concerned with the nature and justification of human knowledge. Epistemology is the study of the ways of knowing or the study of knowledge. Ways of knowing, knowledge, begins with the fear of the Lord according to Proverbs 1:7 and Proverbs 9:10.¹ Henry (1706) posits that the principal part of knowledge is that God must be feared, served, and worshipped so that every thought will be brought into obedience to Christ.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy notes that epistemology comes from two Greek words *episteme* meaning knowledge and *logos* meaning reason. (Steup & Ram, 2020). An interesting observation is that Jesus is referred to as the logos or “word” in John 1:1². Marlowe (n.d.) states that logos in John 1 refers to ultimate truth. It might be argued from this meaning that Jesus is the ultimate truth for establishing knowledge; therefore, the words of Jesus should be considered when establishing a Biblical epistemological framework. Using John 8:31-32 as a reference, a Biblical epistemological framework appears that can be applied to various areas of life.

JOHN 8:31-32

John 8:31-32 (ESV, 2001) states, “So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set

¹ Proverbs 1:7 (New King James Bible, 2007) states, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.” Proverbs 9:10 (NKJV, 2007) states, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”

² John 1:1 (English Standard Version Bible, 2001) states, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

you free.” The first step one can learn about an epistemological framework from the selected scripture is that one must believe in Jesus. Jesus was speaking to the Jews who believed in Him. This was not merely an intellectual assent, but a belief unto salvation. The same word for believe³ that is used here is also used by Jesus in Mark 1:15b, “repent and believe in the gospel” (ESV, 2001). Having a proper epistemological framework requires a belief in Jesus Christ that leads to salvation. Darby (1820) states that the Jews who truly believed in Jesus knew that He was Savior and Messiah who died for their sins. Not only is this the first step in building a biblical epistemology, the following two steps are impossible without belief unto salvation. Those who do not have belief unto salvation are blinded and will not desire the truth that comes from step two – abiding in the word.⁴

If the first step in building a proper epistemology, according to John 8:31-32, is believing in Jesus, then the next step is to abide in the word. The Geneva Study Bible (1560) states that “the true disciples of Christ continue in his doctrine, that profiting more and more in the knowledge of the truth they may be delivered from the most grievous burden of sin.” II Timothy 3:16 (NKJV, 2007) states, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” To abide in the word is to dwell, continue, and endure in the Bible⁵. As David penned Psalm 119, he stated “your word is a lamp unto my feet and a

³ The Greek word used for believe in John 8:31 is *pepisteukotas*. The same word is used over 200 times throughout the Bible.

⁴ II Corinthians 4:3-4 (ESV, 2001) says, “And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” Those who do not believe are blinded from truth and knowledge that comes from growing through God’s word. Contrast that with those who do believe and long for biblical truth, “like newborn infants long for pure spiritual milk” (ESV, 2001, I Peter 2:2).

⁵ The definitions for the word abide come from the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (Orr, 1915).

light to my path” (ESV, 2001, Psalm 119:105). God’s word illuminates the paths in life that believers should take. The Bible points sinners to Christ as Savior⁶ and helps believers to grow through its sanctifying power⁷. The writer of Hebrews reminds readers that the “word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of the soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (NKJV, 2007). Abiding in the word offers believers insights that are living and powerful discerning thoughts and intents. Believers gain this knowledge through Biblical insight, and it leads to the final step in a proper epistemology.

Step one of a Biblical epistemology is believing in Jesus. Step two is to abide in the word. Step three is to know the truth. According to John 8:31-32, the Jews believed in Jesus and abided in the word of God. This provided the first two steps they needed for the final step in a proper epistemology – to know the truth. Knowing the truth goes beyond mindful head knowledge and permeates the heart and soul. Poole (1685) notes that this truth comes directly from knowing Christ as the way, the truth, and the life. This knowledge comes from first-hand experience according to Strong’s Concordance (2010)⁸. A new creation comes from a heart and mind that has been transformed by Jesus Christ and studying God’s word. Ephesians 4:22-25 describes this transformation: “that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of

⁶ An example of the Bible pointing to Jesus Christ as Savior comes from Acts 8:26-39 where Phillip the Evangelist explains Isaiah 53 to the Ethiopian. Another example comes from Luke 24:13-32 when Jesus appeared on the road to Emmaus to two disciples and used the Old Testament scriptures to describe His life, death, and resurrection.

⁷ In John 17:17 (NKJV, 2007), Jesus prayed, “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.” The process of becoming more like Christ comes through abiding in God’s word – The Bible.

⁸ Salvation through Jesus Christ is the first-hand experience the individual believer receives to actively know the truth. It permeates the head, heart, and soul to offer a new epistemology.

your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness” (NKJV, 2007). In *Mere Christianity* Lewis (1952) describes how knowing the truth involves God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. A Christian prays to God through the prompting of the Spirit. All knowledge that the Christian uses to pray comes from Christ. The Christian is reaching out to God the Father through God the Spirit embracing the truth of God the Son. Knowing the truth is facilitated through the trinitarian God. While the Holy Spirit had not yet been poured out on believers in John chapter 8, He is promised by Jesus in John chapter 14⁹. Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth in John 14:17. Christians can have an appropriate epistemology for knowing God and His creation through a three-step process revealed in John 8:31-32 by believing in Jesus, abiding in the word, and knowing the truth.

Initial Framework

The previous paragraphs outlined an epistemology, a theory or way of knowing, framed around John 8:31-32. It is a three-step epistemology that must be taken in sequential order of believing in Jesus, abiding in the word, and knowing the truth. From this Biblical epistemology, a framework emerges as displayed in Figure 1.

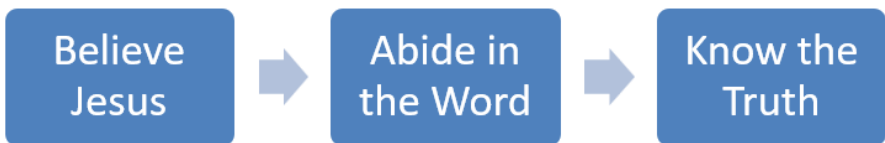


Figure 1. *Epistemology from John 8:31-32*

⁹ In John 14:16 (ESV, 2001) Jesus is referring to the Holy Spirit and says, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper to be with you forever.” The promised pouring out of the Holy Spirit on believers occurred in Acts chapter 2.

Note. “So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’”

First, one must believe in Jesus. Once a belief unto salvation has occurred, then one must abide in the word of God. A love for the Bible offers a deeper understanding of God and His creation. Finally, one will be led into all truth through faith in Jesus Christ, a growing understanding of the Bible, and the promptings of the Holy Spirit. While a Biblical epistemological framework is vitally important, understanding how to apply this epistemology is equally important. Scripture can be used to help Christians move from a more theoretical epistemological framework to practical application.

APPLICATION OF THE EPISTEMOLOGY

A construct for applying this epistemology can be achieved by combining two sets of scriptures. The first set of scriptures has been described in detail in the framework of the epistemology (John 8:31-32), but the other set comes from Mark 12:30 (ESV, 2001): “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.¹⁰” A couple of brief points need to be noted concerning Mark 12:30. First, the type of love reflected in this verse is agape love (Greek Lexicon, n.d.). Agape love can be associated with the type of love that comes from God or happens through a relationship with God.¹¹ Next, note how Jesus uses the phrase, “your God.” There is a possessive relationship signified by “your,” meaning this scripture is for those who truly believe in

¹⁰ Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 in this particular scripture. MacArthur (2021) notes that some manuscripts include mind, and the use of various terms displays the wholeness of this love for the Lord.

¹¹ This comes from the Greek Lexicon and Strong’s Concordance found on Biblehub.com. Note how agape love is used in Romans 5:8 (NKJV, 2007): “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” This agape love is at the core of salvation through Jesus Christ.

God and possess a relationship with God¹². Finally, the heart, mind, and soul are not merely used to display three human faculties, but also to display the completeness of the kind of love that should be offered to the Lord (MacArthur, 2021). These three elements are central to applying A Biblical epistemology – heart, soul, and mind.

The Heart

What exactly was Jesus referring to when He described loving God with all one's heart? Alewine (2020) says that the heart encompasses passions, desires, and affections. Kardias is the Greek word for heart in this passage and that offers readers some insight into what Jesus was saying. Consider cardio in English, and it can be determined that Jesus' use of heart was similar to a more contemporary use of the word heart. It is the seat of emotions and the physical and literal organ in the body. Believers are to love the Lord with all their emotions, affections, and passion.

These same affections and emotions are what lead people to reject or truly believe in Jesus. Mark 3 and Ephesians 4¹³ use the same word for heart that is used in Mark 12:30 to describe those who rejected Jesus. Matthew 5:8 (ESV, 2001) says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Again, Jesus uses the same word in Greek for heart that is used in Mark 12:30. Proverbs 4:23 (ESV, 2001) says, "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life." Eternal life flows from a heart that affectionately loves Jesus. The first step

¹² Barnes (1834) highlights the relationship of Israel to God and God to Israel as a possessive relationship in his commentary on Deuteronomy 6:5.

¹³ Mark 3:5 (ESV, 2001) says, "And he looked around them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was restored." Ephesians 4:18 (ESV, 2001) states, "They are darkened in their understanding, alienating from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart."

in the epistemological framework of believing in Jesus can correspond to loving the Lord with all one's heart.

The Mind

Loving God with all one's mind is a command from one's intellectual nature to love God (Jamieson, Fausset, & Brown, 1871). It is a melding of intelligence coming from the mind with the affections stemming from the heart. The same word for mind¹⁴ is used in Hebrews 8:10 (NKJV, 2007); "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people." Loving the Lord with all one's mind can happen through understanding and studying His laws. In other words, abiding in His word. Wellum (n.d.) states that God's laws, or the law of God, refers to who God is and how His creation is to respond to Him through their behavior as defined by the Old and New Testaments. Loving the Lord with all one's mind requires a careful examination and application of scripture. I John 5:2-3 (ESV, 2001) states, "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments."

The Department of Philosophy at the University of Sheffield states that epistemology is concerned with the mind's relation to reality (n.d.). Jesus stated in Matthew 5:17-18 (NKJV, 2007), "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will no means pass away from the law till all is fulfilled."¹⁵ The word of

¹⁴ The Greek word *dianoia* is used for mind in Mark 12:30 and Hebrews 8:10.

¹⁵ The *Expositor's Study Bible* explains that Jesus' comment about the Law and the Prophets points to the known Bible of the day – the Old Covenant, the Mosaic Law, and the writings of the Old Testament prophets. It goes on to say that Christ followed the known Bible of the day and commanded His followers to do the same.

God is completely trustworthy and offers believers a window into ultimate truth and reality. The second step in the epistemological framework of abiding in the word corresponds with loving God with all one's mind.

The Soul

Jones (2013) claims that the soul is synonymous with the spirit; therefore, the soul's devotion to God is the deepest spiritual exercise possible. It is closely related to the heart but seems to carry a deeper meaning than just the physical heart. DeRouchie (2013) connects the heart in scripture with the living body, while the soul goes beyond the physical living body to the eternal. Revelation 20:4¹⁶ mentions the end-time believers in Jesus who did not receive the mark of the beast. They were beheaded (physically dead), but their eternal souls lived on with Christ. Strong's Concordance (2010) takes the word soul back to Genesis where God breathed life into Adam. The soul is the direct aftermath of God breathing life into Adam¹⁷. What is important to note about God breathing into Adam is that this happened pre-fall. Sin had not entered creation and man was not subject to die at this point. Humanity was designed to be eternal like the soul is eternal. Psalm 119:89 states; "Forever, O Lord, Your word is settled in heaven." Loving the Lord with all one's soul points to an eternity of the Biblical epistemology. Believers in Jesus who have abided in the word have a working epistemology that is timeless and eternal.

¹⁶ Revelation 20:4 (NKJV, 2007) says, "And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshipped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years." The Greek word for soul here is the same word used for soul in Mark 12:30 – *psuche*.

¹⁷ Genesis 2:7 (ESV, 2001) states, "then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature."

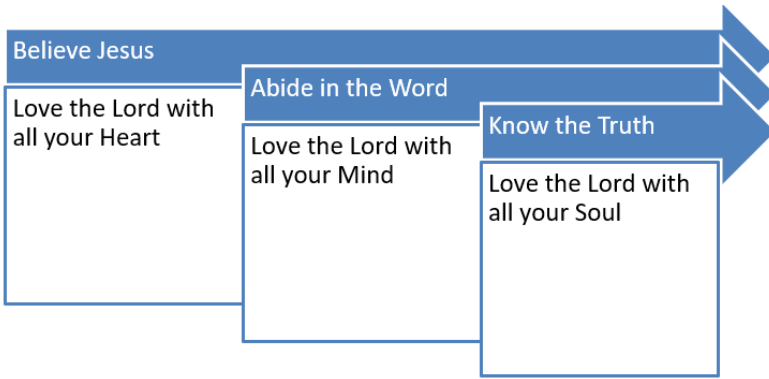


Figure 2. Application of the Epistemology

CONCLUSION

While various epistemologies exist, the Bible offers Christians a framework for knowing and understanding God and His creation. John 8:31-32 can be used to develop a three-step Biblical epistemological framework that involves believing in Jesus, abiding in the word, and knowing the truth. Applying Mark 12:30 to this Biblical epistemological framework pushes Christians to love the Lord with all one's heart, mind, and soul. By following the Biblical epistemological framework from John 8:31-32 and applying it through the lens of loving the Lord with all of one's heart, mind, and soul, Christians have a practical epistemological framework that is Biblical and applicable. A way of knowing emerges that focuses on a relationship with Christ and following God's commands out of the overflow of a heart that has been redeemed. From this framework, the believer has a way of knowing God and His creation that can be applied in various areas of life. It is the ultimate reminder: "For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding" (Proverbs 2:6, ESV, 2001).

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