

Session 6: Bible Study

In this session we are going to learn 3 ways of studying the Bible. The first way is made up of a series of 6 questions we ask of the Bible and of ourselves in order to understand and apply what we read. The second way is an ancient way of reading the Bible as a sacred text while allowing what we read to shape our character. The third way is to take what we learned in the second way and use it in a group setting. The Bible was never intended as a book for individual study primarily. Rather the Bible is a community book, a book for the whole church to know, and live out together. There is nothing more important than knowing and hiding the word of God in our hearts. It's God speaking to us about the past, in our present, and for the future.

Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof, an enchanted movie for me, looks forward to a day when he could study the word of God.

If I were a rich man... I'll build house with rooms by the dozens, I'll fill the yard with chicks, and turkeys, and geese for the town to see and hear, my wife will look like a rich man's wife. That's all great. But that's not the ultimate happiness. What is it he wants to do most of all?

If I were rich, I'd have the time that I lack
To sit in the synagogue and pray.
And maybe have a seat by the Eastern wall.
And I'd discuss the holy books with the learned men, several hours every day.
That would be the sweetest thing of all.

Studying God's words is one the sweetest things we can practice. And no, it cannot wait till we are rich. We must be very intentional about it. We must discipline ourselves to practice for the purpose of being helped in our goal of becoming the godly people we are designed to be.

Let's also remember something important about the disciplines. It's not about the disciplines. Whether studying the Bible, or praying, or silence and solitude, or whatever activity we do, it's about Jesus and the transformation of our character into the character of Jesus. If the disciplines are to be truly useful, they are only so as means of grace and not an end in themselves. Without the right goal in mind, we will flub the disciplines. The goal is likeness to Christ. They become mechanics and lose their spiritual vitality. The disciplines are the channel along which God's enabling flows. They are the power tools we all need to renovate and reconstruct our lives in Christ.

1. THE FIRST WAY OR FRAMEWORK OF STUDYING THE BIBLE IS TO ASK THE TEXT WE ARE READING A SERIES OF QUESTIONS.

Let's call these the 6 Lydia Questions of studying the Bible.

I believe it was Dennis Hampton who used these originally when he started new home Bible study groups and train them to study the Bible. I would ask permission but Dennis is no longer alive, though he'll be glad to know that he still speaks. I believe they are called Lydia questions because the biblical Lydia invited Paul into her house after she received the message of Paul. And you can only imagine that questions were flying back and forth.

You begin by selecting a passage to study. Perhaps a passage you already studied in Sunday school or small group.

Maybe it's the passage the pastor preached from that Sunday or sometime in the past.

It could a passage that you are simply interested in.

The passage should be manageable. Parables of Jesus, or section of a letter, a psalm, or story in the Old Testament, are all good choices.

Here a good study Bible is helpful in that a Study Bible organizes the text in such a way that it is helpful for study.

After a time of prayer for open heart, and willingness to change, you read the passage slowly, preferable more than once. Or you might like to study a whole book of the Bible like one of the Gospels in this way. For illustration and convenience I'm going to use the incidence of a healing of a paralytic in Mark 2:1-12.

1. **Here's the first question:** What is pleasing to me or us in this passage? What is attractive? What do I like? Who am I attracted to? What actions and attitudes do I see and like? What did they say that sounds right and good? Did they respond well to what's happening? So let's read and consider the main question we're first asking: What do I like? Read Mark 2:1-12. What would really be helpful as you study is to keep a notebook about what you're discovering and learning. This notebook is just for you. So write any way you want to. Bullet points, or prose, or just words as reminders of what you see and like.

For me when I read it I found myself very pleased to know that:

- Jesus was willing to be interrupted.
- Jesus cared about a "no body".
- Men went to a lot of trouble to bring someone to Jesus.
- I was happy for the man who got to walk again. I can only imagine what his life was like for him.

- He was willing to be brought.
- Jesus puts his opponents in their place.

2. **Here's the second question:** What bothered you in this story? What didn't you like? Take Mark 2:1-12 again. Maybe someone in particular, or a group just didn't sit right with you. Ask yourself why?

What words, thoughts, actions affected you strongly here? To what point do they bother you? It's important here not to go fishing somewhere else to find answers. Don't look for what's not there for now. Stick with what you see, observe about the people or actions from the passage.

Also, look inside yourself to get your answer to the question.

For me, when I read this some of the things that bothered me were:

- Some people strongly **complained**. Why would anyone object to someone being forgiven or healed?
- They **accuse** Jesus of swearing.
- They seem to be **mistrustful**.

So there is complaining, accusing, and mistrusting going here. That bothers me.

A good thing at this point is to ask your self "why do these things bother me so much?" Take a little time to listen. The Holy Spirit who is teaching you might speak quietly in your heart.

3. **What didn't you/we understand while reading? A follow up question to this is what do you intend to do about what you didn't understand?** It's one thing to be ignorant. **It's another to remain willfully ignorant.** That's laziness. How would you find answers to what you don't at first understand? Example Mark 2:1-12.

Do you understand how these men could dig up and roof? And why would they do it in the first place? How would they get up to the roof?

Why do the scribes complain? What hit them as wrong that they complain?

What makes them accuse Jesus of blasphemy? What is blasphemy anyway?

Do you get what the Son of Man mean?

Do you understand why Jesus addresses this grown man as "Son"?

What about sin? Why does Jesus forgive this man's sins before he heals him physically especially since he came for physical healing mainly?

Why were the men in such a hurry to get this paralyzed man to Jesus? Why couldn't they wait?

What's really at stake that could be the cause of this raucous between Jesus and these men?

How then are you going to find answers to these questions? Where would you go? Let me suggest a few ways.

- 1) *Have you found another passage of Scripture that addresses similar questions you've already dealt with?* Rely on your previous study of the Bible or of another passage from the Bible to shed light on what you don't understand. But be careful not to impose one text's meaning on another. Different Bible writers use the same words differently at times. Paul speaks of works one way and James speaks of works in another way. It's not right to impose Paul's meaning on James or James' on Paul.
- 2) *Make sure you have a good study Bible handy when you're studying.* Your pastor or group leader knows what advice to give you. Depend on them for guiding you to a good study tool. I recommend the NIV study Bible, or the NASB studies Bible to help you understand some of what you don't understand.
- 3) *Ask others more experienced in Bible study to help you understand or to help you confirm what you understand.* The Bible was never meant to be a book of solo reading or interpretation. It's the Scripture for the community and it's the community that shapes the right interpretation. In 2 Peter 1:20 Peter tells us so.

4. Here's the fourth question: What does this passage teach me/us about God?

In a sense this is the most important question. The greatest challenge we have is to come to know who God is and what he is like so we can learn the right story about God. Other questions to ask: Is this aspect of God real in your life? Do you know it by experience or is it only head knowledge? When we ask questions about God we're not longer seeking information, we're seeking transformation. We want to know so we can't love and appreciate God. We're not alone in learning this. When Jesus was ready to leave this earth he promised his disciples he would send them the Holy Spirit to help them remember and understand his teachings. Here we rely on the Holy Spirit to be our teacher.

Stick to the passage you're reading and be slow about letting other passages not related to what you're reading govern your interpretation.

Example from Mark 2:1-12 about what God is teaching.

To speak for God or do things in the name of God without God's approval is blasphemy.

Jesus is actually glorifying God not blaspheming against him as the crowd realizes. Jesus does act like God acts. He forgives the sins people commit against others not just against himself. No one has that right other than God and make it stick. God is glorified and his will is made public. That's always God's will.

God heals. Miracles are not an end. They are opportunities to show God off first and do good. Miracles are signs that point to God.

5. **What do you and your group need to do about what God is teaching you from this passage?** From the example we've been using in Mark 2:1-12, how would you answer this question for yourself?

How about forgiveness and confession? Is there something I need to be forgiven for? Is there someone I need to forgive? Do I need to confess? If you want to act by faith on that what do you need to do? Could you use the process of repentance and faith we studied earlier? If repentance: observe, reflect and discuss with others in your group.

How about healing? Do I need healing? Do others I know need healing? Perhaps the teaching is to work with others in bringing other people to Jesus? What would I come to Jesus for right now?

6. **The sixth question is this: What word, sentence or verse will you reflect on this week?**

What kept coming back to you again and again in this passage? What words or phrases stayed with you and resonated with your soul? What kept coming to the surface?

What do you think you should do about it?

Do you sense a nudge from God that this passage is crucial to your life right now and that memorizing it would do you a whole lot of good?

Maybe you need to reread this passage several times this week to continue hearing from God.

2. THE SECOND METHOD OF STUDYING THE BIBLE

The Bible can be read for information and entertainment. Many do this with it. But our reading must be more purposeful than that. Our Bible study must lead somewhere beyond just our minds (Feelings, and thoughts). It must change our hearts (our wills and spirits). Perhaps you have also noticed that the disciplines we've been teaching in this course are not stand-alone activities. Many of them are parts of each other. For example, studying, silence, solitude, and praying are all part of the same thing: our ongoing conversation with God and our listening to God.

So how do we do this kind of study?

Questions 5-6 we just finished learning to do are designed to allow ourselves be shaped by God's word. We will expand on questions 5-6 with a four-step process of studying the Bible meditatively. "Our prayer as we study in this way is always that God would meet us and speak specifically to us, for ultimately the Word of God is God speaking." DW.

This way of studying the Bible is not new. Millions of Christians have practiced it in the past and is still very common today. There are 4 steps to this kind of study.

In this method what we are studying is a “who”, not a “what”. Our main object of study is not the Bible, but ourselves. So instead of me studying the Bible, I’m allowing God to look into my soul for me to tell me about me through his Word. This is an excellent way of turning to God in Bible study. By the way, it’s always a good idea to have a journal to record our thoughts and God’s thoughts this way of studying

What then is the first step?

The first step is to read the passage slowly, and deliberately. We read it quietly and we read it out loud. The Bible was first written to be spoken to others out loud. We read and are open to God to speak from his word. We wait to hear. We don’t rush things. When a word resonates with us we hang on to it. Since we are already familiar with Mk 2:1-12, we can use the same passage for learning this way of study. So let me read it and illustrate. As I read, “I’m all ears”. There is mystery here, a mystery that’s based on faith, the trust that God wants to reveal himself to me, and show me myself more than I could ever want to. So what grabbed your attention as I read?

What is the second step?

The second step is to ponder what we read. This step has a lot of Biblical support. Many practiced it. The Psalm writers talk a lot about meditating on God’s word. By meditating they mean to recall something and look at it carefully again. Not just the Psalm writers do that, Mary, the Lord’s mother, heard some things that touched her deeply, things she couldn’t understand or deal with immediately. So she took some time, however long it took her to understand them. Her understanding, I’m sure was gradual and cumulative. It will be so with us too. How did Mary know to do that? Well it was because it’s natural to do when we hear things that deeply affect us. It was also the practice of pious people, people devoted to God, to practice meditation.

We ponder when we consider something deeply and thoroughly. We weigh the importance of something carefully in our minds.

What do we ponder specifically? We ponder the word or phrase we received so that we may hear what God might have to say to us. God is studying us while we ponder. It’s like the Psalmist says: Your word I’m hiding in my heart so I don’t commit any sins against you, not just for your sake, but for my sake also.

What is the third step?

The third step is to pray. Prayer we said is to have a conversation with God about what concerns us and mostly about what concerns God. We pray about what the phrase or word that resonated with us the most mean. We ask God to tell us what it means. We cry out to God. We want to hear what he thinks. We want to have a conversation with him about what he says and understand how we can obey what we hear. We want to confess and tell him what we've done. We want to fess up.

What is the fourth and final step?

The last step is to rest quietly in reflection before God. Simple rest. Not doing much of anything other than waiting on God. Waiting for God to drive his word deeply in us.

The key to this kind of reading is to be open to hear God in fresh ways. Not new ways as if we're looking for hidden treasures. We want to set aside our ideas of how this passage applied to us in the past. If we are reading a new passage this way, we may want to do the first method first, then do this method of study some time after. When we are open to God, we hear him say things to us that may be surprising and wouldn't be able to hear any other way.

3. The third method of studying the Bible is similar to the second. Except we do it in a group setting. We take turns reading. We still ponder. We still pray with each other and now for each other. And we wait on God to direct us.