

Basic Christianity
From An Urban Perspective Unit 2
Week 4: How Do I Study the Bible?

Introduction:

Instructors: Start with a discussion over the questions below.

Maybe you have heard the racist saying, “If you ever want to hide something from a black man, put it in a book.”

For many of us, reading the Bible is an overwhelming burden. The language and content seem so far from what we're used to reading and thinking about. If you put a Bible in someone's hands, they often look at it, and think, “This is a big, thick book. How could I ever understand all this? Where should I start?”

What barriers keep you from studying the Bible?

Why do we have to interpret the Bible? Can't we just read it and follow it?

Look at what Paul tells Timothy:

“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling *accurately* the word of truth.” – 2 Timothy 2:15

Paul commands Timothy to handle the word *accurately*, because it is often handled inaccurately. It's easy to make mistakes and misread the Bible, making it say something it doesn't say. You see examples of this all the time when preachers twist scripture to line their pockets with cash. That's why we need to work hard to find the correct interpretation.

Here's one thing you can be sure of: God loves you and wants you to understand his word. He has written it so that you can understand it because he is eager to communicate with you.

There's a saying, “The Bible is shallow enough for babies to wade in, but deep enough for elephants to drown in.” While it's true that some parts of the Bible are hard to understand, just about *anyone* can get the basic message.

Here are some basic tips on accurately interpreting what the Bible really says.

1. Select a good study Bible in a *modern* translation.

A good study Bible has maps, charts, a description of the background of each book, and comments at the bottom of the page to help explain difficult passages.

Maybe you have heard that the King James Bible is the only one to use. The old words (“thee” and “thou shalt”) sound authoritative, but the language is from 1611 and so outdated that it is very difficult to understand. Modern Bibles like the New Living Translation are more accurate and easier to read.

2. Interpret the Bible *literally*.

Whenever you can, take the normal, everyday meaning of the words. Usually, the text "means what it says and says what it means." However, interpreting literally also means the interpretation takes into account writing styles and figures of speech. The Bible has different writing styles--poetry, history,

parables, songs, wise sayings, etc. When you read the Bible, you have to pay attention to the writing style being used.

“Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.”—Proverbs 22:6

Words of wisdom like this in the Proverbs are maxims – wise sayings that are generally, but not always, true. Sometimes parents do a great job teaching their children to follow God, but their kids walk away. But generally, if we train our children in the way they should go, our kids will turn out alright.

Examples of figures of speech:

Word picture:

Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches.” (John 15:5) Jesus obviously is not claiming to be a grape vine. He’s using an analogy to explain why we need to depend on him.

Exaggerated language:

Jesus says, “If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out.” (Matthew 5:29) Does he really want us to rip our eyes out when we lust after a beautiful woman? No, but he is emphasizing the seriousness of our sin.

3. Interpret *culturally*.

Before we ask what a verse means to us, we first have to ask what it meant to the original readers who lived 1000’s of years before us. In order to do this, we have to bridge the years between us and them by getting an understanding of the words, sayings, customs, money, geography, etc. from their culture. We can use Bible dictionaries to help us do this.

It’s just like when we want to communicate with a teenager. We have to be familiar with youth culture in order to understand them and that involves learning words they use (slang words, sayings, etc.) and knowing about terms that are part of their culture – “Wii,” “mp3 players,” “Guitar Hero,” “texting,” etc.

If we try to read the Bible without getting into their culture, we can easily get confused and misinterpret passages. Some passages won’t make any sense until you learn more about the cultural background of the words and the situation.

For example:

(Psalm 26:6) “The Lord made Lebanon skip like a calf, Sirion like a wild ox.

“Lebanon” and “Sirion” are huge mountains in Israel. Both are over 10,000 feet high. How powerful is God? He is so powerful, he can make mountains skip like a baby calf or a wild ox. If you didn’t know that David was referring to mountains, you wouldn’t be able to understand what he is saying about God.

4. Interpret passages in *harmony* with each other.

Your interpretation should not contradict what other passages teach.

For example:

Jesus: “If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciples” – Luke 14:26

Paul: "...encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children..." – Titus 2:4

Are Jesus and Paul contradicting each other? Does Jesus really want us to hate our spouses and children? Of course not. Jesus is saying our love for him should be stronger than our love for anything else.

5. Use your *common sense*.

"Pray without ceasing" -- 1 Thessalonians 5:17

Are we really supposed to pray every waking moment of our day? Or is Paul just saying we should be prayerful throughout the day and staying in contact with God.

6. Don't take a passage out of *context*.

Political advertisements are always quoting people out of context. They quote a short phrase that someone says and leave out what they said before and after. Then the person is misrepresented. We can do the same thing with the Bible.

Some people say you can make Bible say anything you want. In one way this is true. If we just lift verses out of their context, we can be very creative. But if we read the passage before and after the verse we are reading, we're more likely to get the correct interpretation.

People often use the verse below to warn Christians to never drink a drop of alcohol or smoke a cigarette:

"Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God?" -- 1 Corinthians 6:19

But if you read before and after this verse, you realize that Paul is focusing on sexual sin. The Bible never prohibits people from drinking alcohol. Smoking is an unwise habit. So is eating fatty food! But 1 Corinthians 6:19 isn't about smoking and drinking.

7. Know which *covenant* the passage is under.

A covenant is a contract, an agreement between two parties. God's purpose has never changed, but he has made different covenants with people over the years. This means the way he works with people has changed.

God made a covenant with the Jews in the Old Testament that explained how the Jews should live. If they sinned, they were supposed to offer sacrifices. But Jesus came as the final sacrifice for our sin. This began a new contract called the "New Covenant."

"When God speaks of a 'new' covenant, it means he has made the first one obsolete. It is now out of date and will soon disappear." – Hebrews 8:13

Now that we're under a New Covenant, the commands to sacrifice no longer apply to us.

Under the Old Covenant, the Jews were not allowed to eat certain foods because they were "unclean." But Jesus has declared all foods clean under the New Covenant.

“So don’t let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths.¹⁷ For these rules are only shadows of the reality yet to come. And Christ himself is that reality.” -- Col 2:16-17

The old rules pointed to Christ. But now that Christ has come, they don’t apply. So that’s why we don’t obey every command in the Old Testament. But we should obey commands in the Old Testament that are repeated in the New.

8. Interpret the unclear in light of the *clear*.

There are some odd passages which have an unclear meaning. These should be interpreted consistently with well established ones. Every important doctrine is taught clearly and repeatedly in the Bible. We shouldn’t base our doctrine on obscure and hard to understand passages.

Some passages are so vague that the meaning may never be known:

“If the dead will not be raised, what point is there in people being baptized for those who are dead? Why do it unless the dead will someday rise again?” – 1 Corinthians 15:29

Note to instructor: Based on this passage, Mormons baptize living people on behalf of dead ancestors. This way, their deceased family members can enter the kingdom of God. But the Bible teaches that it is “appointed for man to die once, and then comes judgment” (Heb. 9:27) Once we die, our eternal fate is sealed. By building a doctrine on this 1 Cor. 15:29, the Mormons have contradicted the clear teaching of the Bible that there is no salvation for those who die apart from the Lord.

When preachers take a text out of the Bible and launch into a strange direction that doesn’t square with the rest of the Bible, we should be wary.

9. Emphasize what the Bible *emphasizes*.

The importance of a passage is determined by how much emphasis it is given by the rest of scripture. This is where so many groups and people go wrong. They focus on something the Bible does not emphasize like the gift of tongues and make it more than it is. Some Christians do speak in tongues, but the Bible doesn’t emphasize it. In fact, most of the biblical instruction on tongues has to do with chronic misuse of this gift.

10. Interpret with *dependence* on the Holy Spirit.

The Bible is more than a book. It is God’s living word.

“For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires.” – Hebrews 4:12

As you read the Bible, God speaks to you through his Holy Spirit. In fact, without the help of the Holy Spirit, you can’t fully understand the word.

“And we have received God’s Spirit (not the world’s spirit), so we can know the wonderful things God has freely given us.” - 1 Corinthians 2:12

The Holy Spirit teaches us not only the meaning of the passage, but how it applies to our lives. That is why it is important to turn to God in prayer before you study the word to ask the Holy Spirit to teach you.

Memory Verse: 2 Timothy 2:15