

Letting the Bible Interpret Us!
A Model for Resourceful Bible Study

What does it take to grasp the essential message of a biblical text and then be transformed by it?

Transforming Bible study first recognizes that the God's word has come through chosen individuals in their own historical and cultural environments. But, the Holy Spirit uses that same word to enlighten and then transform us today. How does it happen?

A Plan for Resourceful Study

Making a Start

- We begin prayerfully and humbly, willing to let the biblical passage speak to us.
- We remember that the Bible is composed of *differing kinds* of literature. For instance we do not read historical narrative the same way we read the letters of the New Testament.

Observing the Text

- We pay attention to *units* of the biblical text. This applies to paragraph units as well as units within paragraphs. (Most contemporary editions of the Bible indicate paragraphs.) We notice the *progress of thought* from one paragraph to another, for this helps us to recognize the unfolding message of the inspired author. We also observe the larger units of groups of paragraphs.
- We observe *key words* and /or phrases that may be repeated. This points us to the emphasis of the author's message.
- We observe other *relationships* between units of our passage, such as cause-effect, comparison, contrast, climax, etc.

Interpreting the Text

- We then *ask important questions* about what we observe in the passage like the following. What does this term mean? Why is this "relationship" here? What are the implications?
- We will need to *answer our interpretive questions* in terms of both the immediate and the broader context of our passage. We will also answer from what we know of the historical background of the passage. Here Bible dictionaries and commentaries can be important. Much insight can come from careful and prayerful thought. This is the role of *interpreting* the text!
- From our interpretive insights we discern what we see as THE MESSAGE of the passage we are studying.

Applying the Text

- Finally we think about *application*. What does the Message of the passage say to us? To our church? To our society? Certain basic principles help us. If the essential message is obviously a transcendent truth, as often in the letters of the New Testament, then we can go more directly to application. But if the message is rooted more in a cultural setting that is foreign to us, we will need to consider underlying principles and seek to make an application by analogy.
- Finally, the temptation is to apply the text only theoretically to ourselves (or to someone else!). We need to consider *prayerfully* what God's word says to us. Then we commit to obey it. Thus we will want not only to interpret and apply the biblical text, but allow the Holy Spirit to interpret and transform *us* through the eternal word of God!

An Example of Resourceful Study

Luke 11:5-13 (using the New American Standard Bible)

Making a start

- A prayer: Lord, I trust you to make this part of your Word come alive for me.
- The passage is from the Gospels and so it combines narrative with words from our Lord as interpreted by the Evangelist Luke. What is the message of the Lord through Luke?

Observing and Interpreting the Text

- We will observe the units of this passage. First, we see that in verses 5-8 Jesus gives a parable of a friend in urgent need of help.
- An important key word is "persistence" (vs. 8). This explains why the friend got what he wanted.
- The second unit is verses 9-10, in which Jesus interprets the parable by applying it to his disciples (see vs. 1).
- An interpretive question would be to ask why Jesus applies this kind of parable to his disciples. This brings us to realize that Jesus wants his disciples to be *persistent* in the prayer of petition.
- In what may be considered the final unit, verses 11-13, Jesus compares the readiness of earthly fathers to grant the requests of their children with the greater readiness of the heavenly Father. It is a kind of extension of the application in the previous unit, as the disciples are still addressed.
- Another interpretive question is: Why does Jesus make this comparison? Even though the answer is fairly obvious, the question leads us to focus on the loving kindness of the heavenly Father to answer prayer.
- We observe that the verb "ask" is found in every verse *after* the parable of verses 5-8.

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- To question why "ask" is repeated so often leads to think further about the theme of the entire unit.
- Another question: What is the meaning of "ask" in these verses? This brings us to consider the immediate context of the parable of *persistent* asking.
- But we observe that the overall unit concludes with a *particular* prayer request--for the Holy Spirit! Thus, the Message of the passage is how to ask for the Holy Spirit--persistently.
- The broader context of Luke-Acts helps us answer the question of the *implications* of this Message for the church. We see an example in Acts 4:23-31.

Applying the Text

- This prepares us for application. The Message of the Holy Spirit for us is to be serious in our hunger for the power of the Holy Spirit. Let US pray persistently until we know that we have been touched by God in a life-changing way.
- May I have a keen desire to encourage others to be open to the fullness of the Holy Spirit in their lives and to pray persistently for this.