

Lesson 1 - The Process of Bible Study

I. Introduction

I want to welcome you to the class on Bible Study and Interpretation. It's good to see everybody here. We're going to have a good time with this class over the next few weeks, and it's one that all of us need. It is very important because the way we read and understand the Bible affects the way we live. We make decisions based on our understanding of what we're reading in the Scriptures. If we're serious about the Scriptures as some type of authority in our lives, it's very important for us to think through how we can understand it correctly because all of us interpret the Bible. Everybody does. It's just a question of whether we're reading it in ways that are healthy and positive or in ways that may lead us down some paths of wrong thinking about God and life.

I want to ask you to do something with me from the start. I want us to look at a passage of Scripture together and talk about it. That passage is 1 Corinthians 8. We're going to read this whole chapter together and then I want to ask you this question: What are the challenges of reading and understanding and studying a passage like this? And then we're going to get into a word picture that I think describes the process of Bible reading and Bible study pretty well. So let's read this passage together. I'm reading from the New American Standard translation.

"Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; but if anyone loves God, he is known by him. Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through him. However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now" – false gods – "eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled. But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat. But take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. And thus, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble."

Now I picked a passage that's foreign to us. Not a little bit; it's probably a lot foreign to us in a number of ways. I picked that passage on purpose. So I want to ask the question: What are some challenges? Right from the start we hop down into Corinth in the first century A.D. and we read this strange passage about eating meat sacrificed to idols. To get a reference point here, how many people this week faced your big temptation in life that had to do with whether or not you were going to eat meat that was sacrificed to an idol or a false god? Anybody here really struggled with that this week? Well, I would think to most of us, that's not something that was a real big temptation this week.

When we read a passage like this, what are some challenges we face right from the beginning in terms of understanding it, thinking about how to apply it to our lives, even just reading it on the surface?

II. Challenges in understanding and applying Scriptures to our lives

A. Cultural differences

There's obviously some very different cultural dynamics going on here. It's very much like going to a foreign country. What is culture anyway? How would you describe culture? It's a way of life, a way of doing things. It involves all kinds of things like religious practices, language, dress, ideas about relationships, about gender. There are all kinds of things that are cultural dynamics.

Here in 1 Corinthians 8, the language can be hard for us to follow, and an aspect of that has to do with the logic of the argument. It can be hard to follow if we don't know what's going on. We may wonder: Is it physical food that's being talked about or is it some kind of word picture?

You may think Paul is tying word knots. You may think the flow of the logic and the argument is somewhat convoluted. When you drop down into a passage like this, without understanding the context, it's hard to pick out who is being addressed, why they are being addressed. What we'll find out at some point with Corinth is that this is a letter was written to address very specific problems and questions that had come up in that church. So you really have to understand something about their situation and what Paul is trying to accomplish in this letter.

B. Connecting what Paul said to our lives today

How do we apply a passage like this? If you're having your Bible study or Bible reading time, and you say, "Lord, I really want to get something from your Word today that will help me know how to live in my world this week." What are the challenges of a passage like this? Do we skip it and go find another chapter? No, this is God's Word to us too. We can't take a smorgasbord approach to the Bible. But there can be a temptation to do that. When we come to a passage that's really hard or difficult, or maybe we don't like what is being said there, we want to jump to something else that we feel comfortable with and that we do understand. A lot of people in the church today tend to read the more practical parts of Scriptures that have obvious applications. They like those passages. They don't like to struggle with passages that deal with theology, that they have a hard time understanding or finding application. I think one of the challenges with a passage like this is that of making the connections between what Paul's talking about (that's so foreign to us) and what we have to deal with on a regular basis in our own culture. Well, that's why we're here this morning to talk about Bible study.

III. A word picture: Bible reading like taking a trip

I want to use a word picture that I think describes what we go through with Bible reading or Bible study - that of taking a trip. And I want you to think about a memorable trip you've taken that really made an imprint on your life in some way. I want you to get that trip in mind. We've had a lot of memorable trips in our life. When I was a junior in college, I went to Singapore, and going over into a very, very different culture. Learning the dynamics of that culture and relating to people in that culture was really an amazing experience. And when I came back from that trip and hit Hawaii, and there were Chinese people who were acting like Americans, it blew my

mind. I had a much harder time adapting to the culture when I came back than I did when I went over because I was expecting to have to adjust when I went over. But it was pretty tough when I came back. And there were Americans who were using humor, and you know how in America a lot of times we use humor that's cutting and really puts other people down. You don't have that in a Chinese culture. It's a much different kind of dynamic in terms of the humor in that culture.

I think about our honeymoon. When we went on our honeymoon, I got food poisoning on our honeymoon night. I got some bad lobster at a five-star French restaurant. And in the middle of the night, I got up and Pat had something in her eye. She had a speck in her eye and she wanted to see if I could get that out. I went into the bathroom and when I tried to get that little speck out of her eye, I fainted right out on the floor. And I remember waking up and my face was pressed against the tile floor and my first thought was, God, please don't let me die on my honeymoon night. This would not look good. I've waited so long to get married. And we ended up the next day flying out to El Paso, Texas, in a snow storm. They were having a blizzard in El Paso. Twenty-two inches of snow. We had to fly on to Phoenix and then back to El Paso. We flew in, in zero visibility, and we're snowed in at the Roadway Inn for two days in El Paso. We finally made it all the way to the cabin, waded to the cabin in 33 inches of snow, and then made it back and wound up having a great time. But it was quite a memorable trip. Well, it certainly got our marriage off with a bang.

Well, how about you? What are some memorable trips that you've taken? Think about what was involved in taking that trip. When you went on that trip, you left a home situation, a culture that you were familiar and comfortable with. Probably people around you used language pretty much the same way you do. They probably dressed in a way and acted in a way that you were fairly familiar with. But then you left home and you took a vehicle of some type to get you to that other place. Get in your mind the kind of vehicle you took. Was it a car? Did you go down to Memphis and jump on a plane and fly somewhere? For some of you, you may have been on trips where you hiked part of the distance or something like that. But you took a vehicle and you went to this other place. When you got to the other place, you started finding out what it meant to live there, how people used language, what kind of foods they ate.

I remember when we went to Naples, Florida, a couple of years ago. When you first get to a place for a vacation, you don't know any of the streets. You don't know the places to eat. But after you've lived there for about a week, you learn what people mean by the words they're using. You learn the best places to eat, what the most popular foods are. For instance, in Naples, there's a little place down there we loved to eat that is famous for their Key Lime pie. And so that was a very important part of the culture. We went back and made sure that we were very oriented to Key Lime pie that week. We'd buy whole Key Lime pies and bring them home from that place. But you go and you live in that place for a while and you learn what it means to communicate there. Then you come back home, bringing some souvenirs back with you, and you start living at home once again.

Now we were using the image of a trip, but in some ways Bible study is more like an expedition. Why do I say that? Well, an expedition is not just about getting to the destination. It's also about going there, discovering something, and bringing that something back when you come back home. You go there for a specific purpose and you're going to bring that thing back with you.

A. We have to leave home: Leaving a familiar cultural context

Now let's talk about how Bible study is like doing an expedition or a trip. Well, first of all, let's talk about our home culture, a culture that has shaped how we think and talk and act. That's not a bad thing; that's just a fact of life. All of us have ways in which we have been profoundly influenced by the fact that we live in American culture at this point in history. For example, the way we dress. This morning, I have a tie on, which for our immediate church culture is not a common thing. So immediately when you see me in a tie, you're thinking, well, he's going to speak somewhere else this morning. And you'd be right. Why? Because wearing a tie is not a normal aspect of our immediate church culture. Think about three hundred years from now people looking back and looking at the way we dress at this point in time. And they're going to see us wearing these things and they're going to think that is so goofy that they tied this thing around their neck regularly. But they're going to also look at the other ways that we dress and it's going to seem real foreign to them because they're going to be in a different place in time. It's going to be a different kind of cultural dynamic.

A while back I was going to visit someone in Jackson General Hospital from church here. What happened was I was out running errands and I thought, oh, I need to go by and see so-and-so at the hospital. I had blue jeans on, and I was in a t-shirt and tennis shoes. I went up to that floor and I approached one of the nurses and asked, "Which room is so-and-so in?" and she said, "Well, may I ask why you would want to see them?" And I said, "Well, I'm one of the pastors at their church." And she went, "Well, you're a pretty cool pastor." What do you think she meant by "cool"? Was she saying that the air conditioner in the building had been up a little bit high today and you seem a bit cold. Would you like us to turn some heat on or something like that? Is that what she was saying? No. What did she mean by the word "cool"? From our cultural understanding, what does she mean by the word "cool"? She probably meant, well, you're not stuffy or you're not like my concept of a pastor who I would expect to show up dressed a certain way. She was speaking very much out of our immediate culture - church culture - in this area. So what she was doing is she was approaching the situation from the standpoint of the way she thinks about how people dress and about how language is used, and all of us have that aspect to our home culture.

Now when Paul says let's talk about food that has been sacrificed to idols, what you and I have to do to get into what he's talking about there is we have to leave home. To understand what he's talking about there, we can't just stay in our own way of thinking, our own mindset in terms of culture and language and practices. We can't just write this off and say, "Well, that's ridiculous. That's stupid. What is he talking about?" Because God intended 1 Corinthians to be written at that place at that time and to communicate specific messages from Paul, who is a very important person in the foundation and development of the early church.

B. The vehicle that gets us there: Sound study process, good tools, right attitudes

So we got to leave home. But what's the vehicle that will get us back to that culture to understand some things about what is going on and what Paul is talking about in this particular passage or any passage that we're dealing with? It's a sound process of study or reading, using good tools with the right spiritual commitments. And these will help us to arrive at the original meaning of the text. In 2 Timothy 2:15, for instance, Paul writes, "Study to show yourself approved."

Now this doesn't mean that you and I are not going to bring our own understandings to the text. Of course we are. The fact that we live in this culture in this day and this time, we will bring unique perspectives to the Bible, and that's normal. But we're going to have to talk about how do we deal with those. But what is a sound process of study? It will involve understanding the language, the forms of communication, the historical backdrop, aspects of the culture, what God was saying to them in that place at that time.

Now let me tell you why I think this is the basic, right way to approach understanding a passage of Scripture. It's because this is the way language works. Language doesn't work apart from a specific context. It doesn't work apart from a specific way that you understand words. It doesn't work apart from even specific situations in life. In fact, I can say the same thing to Pat in the same exact words and mean two completely different things in two different contexts. And so words mean something because they're in specific context.

My wife and I were up in Vancouver, British Columbia, a few years ago. I was teaching a class up there, and we were walking down a street of Langley, British Columbia. Beautiful little town – mountains in the background, the Canadian Rockies, the ocean out in the other direction. It was a gorgeous day. What had happened was someone else was not able to teach this class and at the last minute we were asked to go up there and teach this class. And as we were walking down the street, I said to her, "Boy, you know, I really hate it that so-and-so asked us to come up here this week." We don't normally use sarcasm, but here I did. Now my words had a surface meaning that was exactly the opposite of what I was really saying, and you had to understand the context: the beautiful day, the fact that we were browsing bookstores which we love to do, we were having tea and scones and things like that. The context was very, very important.

And it's the same way in Scripture, that you and I need to take the effort to read and study certain things about this passage because that's the way language works. Language happens in specific context with specific intentions and meanings. It's just like in a conversation. If I'm talking to Tom and Tom is saying something to me and I'm not hearing his intended meaning of what he is trying to communicate, what I'm in fact doing is I'm turning it around to mean something else. Then what I've done is I've disrespected him as a person. And what I want to suggest is if we don't take the time and effort to think through how we read and study what Paul is saying, then in a sense I am disrespecting Paul's message. I'm disrespecting God's choice of that place and that time and what was being communicated, and so we want to do some study to get back to that culture.

C. The foreign culture: The meaning of the text in its original context

The foreignness of the culture is the third point. What is our destination? What I want to suggest is to understand the original meaning of the text as much as we can as given in the place, time and situation in which God revealed his truth. This has to do with respecting God's choice of that place and that time.

There's a portion of Jeremiah 23:36 that says "every man's own word will become an oracle." Part of the judgment on the people of that time was that instead of being oriented to God's Word and to what God would say and responding to it, every person's word became an oracle. Every person reads his own word, his own understanding of reality, as if it was the word of God. Instead of really trying to understand what God was communicating in the context of history, we

read into it what we want it to mean. And so we need to get back as much as we can to understand what was being communicated in that place in that time.

We're going to talk about the difference between meaning and significance. But here's a principle I want to ask you to write in the margin of your notes. This is from Gordon Fee and Doug Stuart in their little book on interpretation. The principle is this: A text cannot mean what it never meant.

A text may have significance for us that it did not have for the Corinthians because we live in a very different place and a very different time. But in terms of the meaning of the text, a text is not going to mean something that it did not mean originally when Paul was writing it. If a text can mean anything, then it doesn't mean anything in particular. If a text can mean anything – if it's just whatever I want it to say – then it doesn't have any specific meaning at all and we certainly can't talk in terms of its authority in our lives.

I remember hearing about a lady who went to her pastor and said, "Pastor, I was reading the Bible and I think through the Bible God is showing me that I am supposed to divorce my husband." And the pastor said, "Well, where did you come up with that?" And she said, "Well, in Paul's writings he says, 'Put off the old man.'" Well, when Paul said, "Put off the old man," did he have in his mind the idea of divorcing? "Old man" is a phrase that we use in our culture at times, but that's passé now. It's not used any more. But when Paul used the term "old man", he never had the concept of divorcing in mind. That's reading meaning from our culture into the passage and changing the meaning of the passage. So as much as we can, we want to get to an understanding of what Paul was trying to say in that place and that time.

D. The return home: The significance of the text for us

This brings us to the fourth step and that is the return trip. Just like you have to take a vehicle to come back home, in Bible reading or Bible study, what's going to get us back home? How are we going to take the meaning of what Paul is saying in that context and bring it back to our day and time? I want to suggest that the vehicle for getting us back home is grasping the significance of what we've learned. We may not be dealing with the same type of situation that Paul describes, but how does God's truth apply to us today?

There are a couple of things that we can look for there. "First of all, what are the shared life experiences that we have with these people to whom the passage was originally written?" What do we have in common with them and what is different about our situation and theirs?

A number of years ago, I was at a retreat and one of my friends who was on the retreat was Korean. And he's gone back to Korea and is the head of a Bible church training department in Korea and has been for a number of years. And we were standing out on a deck of the retreat center. Both of us were having a wonderful experience at this retreat and we were trying to talk to each other about deeper things that were going on inside of us because of what we were experiencing in terms of growth that weekend. But it wasn't happening because his English was very limited and my Korean was pretty much nonexistent. I can say "kam-sa-ham-ni-da," you know, thank you, and a couple of things like that but that's about it. And so we were standing there and both of us were kind of frustrated because we were not able to share our hearts in terms of the spiritual experience that we were having in this beautiful place. And all of a sudden, he started singing "How Great Thou Art" in Korean. And then I joined him, singing in English,

and the music bridged the gap there because we were sharing the words of that song and had a phenomenal time talking through that song about what God was doing in our lives. There was a shared life experience even though we were separated by our cultures.

A second aspect of thinking about the significance would be: "What are the biblical principles that are universally true and relevant here"? They're going to be true for all places at all times. Now let's go back to our passage on eating meat offered to idols and let's talk about these two dynamics here.

We have certain similarities and differences with the people in Corinth at that time. Let's start with the differences. What are differences between us and a person who lived in Corinth in the first century A.D.? Well, one example would be that we can refrigerate our food, but in the ancient world, they had to preserve food with salt and stuff like that. It's a very different world and so they would've have to go out and buy meat that was right there on the street. Another example would be that in our culture specifically, we don't have animal sacrifices like they had. In fact, that's very foreign to us. Also, you have a situation there where the church was actually very young, just a few decades old. We, on the other hand, have the New Testament. We have a long history of the church. Even how they dressed would be very different from how we dress today.

What about similarities? What are the things we have in common with those people who were in that church at that time to whom Paul was writing? Some of the similarities are very basic. For example, we're believers in Jesus. And we're asking questions like how do we live for Jesus in our culture. That's a very important commonality that we have with the Corinthians. Also, they struggled with broader cultural dynamics just like we do. We have dynamics in the church and with people outside the church on whom we have an impact.

As you read this passage of what Paul is saying here, how would you boil down a basic principle of what Paul is talking about? He says in essence: it's not a big deal. This meat is just meat, because the gods these people are worshiping are false gods. We know that everything belongs to the Lord and this is just meat. But if a person who's a believer in the church doesn't understand that, and they may have just come out of a pagan situation where they struggled with this association with false gods, and they see me eating this meat that they normally associated with being offered to the god they once worshipped, it's going to mess them up spiritually. And Paul is saying in essence: If that's the case, if it's going to mess somebody else up spiritually, then I'm not going to use my freedom to eat this kind of meat. Now how would you boil that down to a principle? What's the basic idea that's not just oriented to their culture but really would apply to all Christians at all times?

We talked about the fact that we have some commonalities with them. They're trying to follow Jesus. They're doing it in a broader cultural situation where they're having to make some decisions. They would have impact on others around them in that culture by the decisions that they're making. So what would you say is the principle? How would we boil it down to a truth that we could grab onto in our cultural situation? Well, the principle is: Even when I'm dealing with an area of freedom for myself, I need to evaluate how my decisions are having an effect on other people, specifically people who may not be very mature Christians or haven't been in the church very long. How are my decisions affecting them? We're going to talk about ways to narrow that, but in essence, in general, that's one of the main points that Paul is making.

E. Bringing this all back home: Applying the text to our lives

Now when we think about bringing this home, and that's the last point, we are talking about bringing it back to application. We bring the truth of God's Word to bear on our lives and our world by good application and communication. What then are some possible ways that we can think towards applying a passage like this? I think what we would need to do is to ask ourselves the question: What are some areas of my life in which I may feel freedom but my choices could have a very negative impact on other believers around me in the church? By asking this question, what we've done is we've brought this very foreign, very difficult passage back to our situation. For some of you, you might think about specific types of decisions that you would make. If there are religious parallels, that would be the closest thing to what Paul is talking about here. It may be that you have the freedom to do something associated with another church that you came out of, that you don't feel like they have the best doctrine in the world, but it would really confuse a young believer. Why are you going over there and associating with those people? Well, there are ways that we need to talk about that kind of dynamic, but there may be some other things here.

I've had people bring up the question of the type of movies we watch. Some in the church have more freedom in terms of specific life choices. For instance, in Europe a lot of Christians will drink alcohol at times or drink wine with their meals. If you're going to be in that kind of cultural situation, how do you make decisions about what's appropriate and inappropriate? But when we start thinking about application, we would want to think for our lives what are decisions that we might make that might cause another believer to stumble? And it might be best if we didn't make that kind of choice at this point.

I'll just give you one practical example here that you can relate to. It might be that you have a variety of types of music that you enjoy and that you can listen to. There maybe some types of music that a young believer you are relating to struggles with because it connects to a former way of life when they were not walking with God. It was prior to them coming to Christ. Maybe for some of you who are students, if you are a roommate with that person, you may have freedom to listen to various kinds of music, but you may limit your freedom in that case because a certain type of music would have a negative effect on that person who is your roommate. You may feel genuine freedom because again the Scripture doesn't say, "Don't listen to this kind of music." Now we want to evaluate music on the basis of the message it's communicating, but you may choose to limit your freedom so that it would not negatively affect someone you are trying to help who is a young believer. Well, think about your life. Think about what decisions you make that might need to be limited in order to have the right kind of impact on another person who is around you, especially in terms of their spiritual life and their growth.

IV. Concluding remarks

So in summary, why is the trip important? It's because the God of all the universe has acted and spoken his truth about life in specific times, places, languages, and cultures in history. His revelation has been recorded in and expressed through his inspired Scriptures. Thus the Bible is the most important book in all history for people to read, study, and apply to their lives. Now this doesn't mean that it's easy, but what it does mean is that it is worth putting our effort into. And what we're going to talk about next week is the fact that it is hard to be consistent in Bible

study and Bible reading. And we will talk about some things that can motivate us to do it on a regular basis.

So today, there is this picture that we've talked about, that Bible study or Bible reading is like taking a trip. It's like going to that other culture and bringing something back with you and seeking to apply it in specific ways.

One issue that has been raised by one of you is the New Testament's use of the Old Testament. This is a subject we will talk about at some point. A lot of times what is going on there is that there are parallels between that original cultural situation and the way it's being used in the New Testament. There are various ways that the New Testament authors use the Old Testament, but I don't think that they can be accused of what we normally would call Scripture twisting. There's normally something that's very much in line and in correspondence with the way that God has acted in history and they're sometimes drawing parallels to those situations, and understanding more of the backdrop of the Old Testament passages can help us to see those parallels. We'll talk more about that.

Let me give you a quick preview and then an assignment. We're going to talk in this class about reading the Bible well. What are some plans for reading that can help you? What are the different tools to use in your Bible study and your Bible reading? We're going to talk about basic things like how do you do a word study well and how do you keep from word study fallacies where you come up with stuff that Jesus and Paul never thought of. We're going to talk about how to make very practical, specific application. So we're going to have a good time in the class as we go along. Now here's your assignment for next week. Psalm 119 is a long psalm, but it deals with the benefits of God's word. I want to ask you to read through Psalm 119 a couple times and to jot down all of the different benefits of God's Word. And you're going to find things like "it helps me to keep the right perspective in times of difficulty" and "it keeps me from sin." Jot down as many benefits as you can find of reading God's Word, studying God's Word, being in God's Word.