

How to Enjoy Your Bible Learning to ask the right questions of the text, #3

Intro: As students of the word, we should take the greatest care to make sure that we approach God's word with the right questions so that we discern the meaning God intended and not impose our own ideas upon it. Tonight I want to continue to talk about learning to ask the right questions of the text. In our past two studies we learned that...

Proper Bible study involves two important processes--exegesis and application.

The first task of the interpreter is exegesis, discovering the text's meaning.

Our first approach to Scripture must be to try to span the distance and transport ourselves to the time and place of writing and ask the question, "What did the words of Scripture mean to those who first heard them?"

After we have answered this question, the second task of the interpreter is application, discovering the text's significance for our own setting.

We need to ask the question, "How can I take the information addressed to others in another time and apply to myself today?"

Understanding the meaning of a text depends upon understanding the context of the writing.

"The goal in exegesis is to analyze passages carefully so that the words and intent of the passage are as clear as possible. Speculation is not prized, but attention to word meaning, form, structure, context (historical and biblical) and theology is usually addressed. (Patzia and Petrotta, "Pocket Dictionary of Biblical Studies."

In our past lessons we looked at the importance reading the Scriptures in their historical context. And we can think about that at two levels.

We should try to be as well-informed as possible about the historical background of the writing we are studying.

By whom and to whom was it written?

At what time and place was it written?

What circumstances or events prompted the writing?

What was the author's purpose in writing?

And if the document we are studying is a narrative text, then there is also the historical background of the event being described.

What took place?

When did it take place?

Where did it take place?

Why did it take place?

Second we should read the Scriptures in their cultural context.

The Scriptures were written to people who were quite familiar with their setting. In fact they would not even have to think about the question, "What is the cultural context of this writing?" The cultural context was the fabric of their everyday existence; and the Bible

writers referred to it without the need for explanation. Only when the Biblical writers wrote to people unfamiliar with such things did they take the time to explain (cf. Mk. 5:41)
However with the passing of twenty centuries, our world is a very different from the biblical world. Things that people then might have readily understood might be mysterious to us, unless we knew something about the culture in which they were spoken or done. Cultural context could include things like geography and weather, governments, social structures and customs, clothing, activities of everyday life such as agriculture. Understanding these cultural features will assist us in better understanding the message.

Third we should read the Scriptures in their literary context.

Bible students are notorious for "proof texting," that, is ignoring the literary context of the books of the Bible and using every sentence, clause, or even individual words as statements of truth unrelated to the author's intent or the larger context.

When we talk about literary context we are speaking about the words that are on the page in front of us. Our concern is the relationship of the text with its surrounding text and ultimately to the whole of the Bible.

The message of any particular text is determined by seeing its place in the general flow of thought of the writer in the context. Knowing the flow of thought may even help us know what the author may have intended when a particular passage is uncertain. Therefore, it is important to know how to analyze Scripture to determine the flow of thought. We will use 1 Cor. 13:1-13 to illustrate these analytical techniques.

Questions to ask in determining the flow of thought

What are the major sections of a book?

How does this section fit into the larger picture and help fulfill the book's purpose?

What is the dominant theme of the section or paragraph?

What is the relationship of ideas within the section or paragraph?

How do the ideas of one paragraph or section lead logically to the next?

Techniques for discovering the flow of thought

Look for purpose statements

Look for repeated words and concepts

Simplify complex sentences to get a sense of the structure

Look for rhetorical devices

Watch for verbal road signs that reveal the inter-relatedness of the verses or paragraphs.

Studying 1 Cor. 13 in its literary context

Look for purpose statements

In the larger context of 1 Cor. 12-14 Paul introduces the subject matter in 1 Cor. 12:1, “Now concerning spiritual gifts...” As we focus on 1 Corinthians 13 we see again that Paul gives both an introductory statement and a summary statement.

In 1 Cor. 12:31 Paul makes an introductory statement that explains his intentions in chapter 13:

But earnestly desire the greater gifts. and I show you a still more excellent way. (1 Corinthians 12:31)

In 1 Cor. 13:13 he ends with a parallel statement:

But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:13)

In 1 Cor. 14:1 he makes an application:

Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. (1 Corinthians 14:1)

Look for repeated words and concepts

Clearly in 1 Corinthians 13 a key word is “love”. Paul uses the word at least nine times in this chapter (See text of chart with underlined words).

A secondary concept repeated in 1 Cor. 13 is the practice of spiritual gifts. Note the mention of them in v. 1-3 and v. 8-10.

The references to “tongues” and “prophecy” are clearly miraculous gifts (cf. 12:10).

The context suggests that the references to “knowledge” are also supernatural gifts (Cf. 12:8). Even the good work of “giving” or “martyrdom” in v. 3 may be a manifestation of supernatural “faith” (Cf. 12:9).

The pericope is not just about love, but about showing love in the use of spiritual gifts (remember literary context).

Simply complex sentences

When we simply the sentences in this text we get a picture of the development of the ideas in the chapter.

V. 1—I have become (a noisy gong).

V. 2—I am nothing.

V. 3—I am nothing.

V. 4-7—Love is, love is not, love does not, love (does)

V. 8—Love never fails; but V. 8b-11—They (i.e. spiritual gifts) will be done away; they will cease; it will be done away; the partial will be done away; I put away childish things.

V. 12—we see dimly, (we see) face to face; I know in part; I shall know fully...

V. 13—The greatest of these is love.

The above simple sentences easily suggest three divisions for the chapter: v. 1-3; v. 4-7; v. 8-13.

In v. 1-3 we see the necessity of love in practicing spiritual gifts..

In v. 4-7 we see the characteristics of love in using spiritual gifts..

In v. 8-13 we see the enduring nature of love in contrast with the temporary nature of spiritual gifts.

Look for rhetorical devices

Repetition of words in a certain order serve as rhetorical devices to unify a section.

Note for example Paul's use of the phrase "but do not have love" in v. 1-3.

Note Paul's repeated use of the "love" as the beginning point of each sentence in v. 4-7.

Contrasts can also serve as rhetorical devices to unify a section.

Note the contrast between what will be done away with and what will abide in v. 8-13.

Note the contrast between the result of the period when spiritual gifts were in existence and when they will have passed away.

An illustration is often a rhetorical device to help focus in the key idea of a section. Note the focus of the illustration about growing from childhood to manhood in v. 11. The focus is "I put away childish things"; thus, illustrating how time and maturity bring about changes in conduct.

Watch for verbal road signs that suggest the inter-relationship of ideas

These words help us see the connections between verses or sentences. Many NT verses begin with "for" which translates a common Greek particle of explanation. In general, the word "for" at the beginning of a verse indicates a more specific explanation of or commentary on what has been previously said. Think of it as a new sub-level of the outline.

The word "for" in v. 9 introduces a further explanation of the statement in v. 8 that spiritual gifts will be done away with.
Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; (1 Corinthians 13:8-9)

The word "for" in v. 12 introduces a further explanation of the statement in v. 9-10 that the completion of God's revelation through spiritual gifts will result in a more complete knowledge than that which exists during the time spiritual gifts are being exercised.

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known. (1 Corinthians 13:12)

The word "but" is used by way of contrast to balance what has been previously said.

In v. 10 the word “but” is used to contrast the “perfect” with the “partial”.

For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. (1 Corinthians 13:9-10)

In v. 12 the word “but” is used to contrast the clear vision of full revelation with the dim vision of partial revelation.

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known. (1 Corinthians 13:12)

In v. 13 the word “but” is used to contrast the abiding nature of faith, hope and love to the temporary nature of spiritual gifts like tongues and prophecy.

But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:13)

“Therefore” or “wherefore” concludes or summarizes the thought. If it is in the form of a command, it applies the message to the reader.

In this text the word “therefore” or “wherefore” does not occur, but could very well have been placed before the first sentence of 14:1.

Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. (1 Corinthians 14:1)

Note that often chapter breaks placed by men may actually break the flow of thought of the writer! The exhortation of chapter 14:1 is very much connected to the discussion of the relationship of love to spiritual gifts in chapter 13.

Conclusion: Hopefully our exercise with this text will help familiarize us with some of the analytical techniques that will enable to follow the writer’s flow of thought and see the relationship of his ideas. Practice this on other verses and it will help you see the organizational structure of the writer’s thoughts.