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**Core Seminar**

**How To Study the Bible**

**Class 13: Studying Difficult Passages and Familiar Passages**

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**Introduction**

Throughout our time together, we’ve learned many essential things for how to read the Bible: inductive bible study, studying the Old and New Testaments, understanding the different genres, understanding how passages fit together, and applying them to ourselves today.

Today, our goal is to apply these principles when looking at two types of passages: difficult passages and familiar passages. Difficult passages can leave us puzzled. Familiar passages can leave us bored. The problem isn’t with the passages themselves, but with us. God’s Word is always perfect and glorious, but our understanding and hearts are flawed.

And so, today we are going to look at several principles for interpreting difficult and familiar passages. Then, we are going to apply those principles to particular passages.

**Studying Difficult Passages**

Name some difficult passages in the Bible. Why are they difficult?

Passages of Scripture can be difficult for various different reasons:

* First, there’s the *Culture Gap*. Sometimes we simply don’t understand the cultural setting of passages.
* Second, there’s the *Apparent Contradiction*. I say ‘apparent contradiction,’ because these aren’t true contradictions. They simply *appear* to contradict.
* Third, there’s the *Mystery*. These passages are nearly impossible for anyone to understand.

Here are four steps we should take when studying difficult passages, most of which we’ve covered in earlier classes, but is worth restating:

1. **Pray.**

Don’t underestimate the power of pouring over the Scriptures in prayer. Some of the clearest thinking is done after prayer. Martin Luther once wrote in a letter to his barber, “Many times I have learned more from one prayer than I might have learned from much reading and speculation.”[[1]](#footnote-1) God’s Spirit has spoken through God’s Word and it takes God’s Spirit to understand and apply it to ourselves. So pray.

1. **Examine the context.**

Start with asking, “What is the larger context?” Read the book to know the author, the audience, and the purpose. Then, even more specific, zoom in to the immediate context. What comes before? What comes after? What words are repeated? How does this passage fit in structurally? If the passage is like a puzzle piece, context is like the picture on the box cover. It is so much easier to fit the puzzle piece into the puzzle when you look at the picture. Examine the context.

1. **Let Scripture Interpret Scripture.**

The Bible is the best “fence” for interpreting the Bible. It creates boundaries so that we aren’t led into false doctrine. We must let the clear passages govern the unclear passages. That’s so important, I’m going to repeat it: *let the clear passages govern the unclear passages.* This is key for understanding difficult passages.

*(1) Diagnose the difficulty.* Ask yourself the question, “What is confusing in this passage?” Like a doctor, you need to diagnose the difficulty before you can find the answer.

*(2) Find relevant passages.* Now, go to other Bible passages that are relevant to the difficulty. Start with the same book, and then branch out. One of the best ways to do this is to use a cross-reference tool. You can find these using the center-reference column in your bibles, or with an online bible website, such as biblegateway.com

*(3) Synthesize.* Try to synthesize your passage and other relevant passages together. Which passages are clearest? Let those govern your understanding of the passages that are less clear. This can be hard work. Don’t feel like you need to look at absolutely every possible passage on a given subject. But, take a few similar passages and see how they fit together. Let Scripture interpret Scripture.

Finally,

1. **Ask for Help.**

You need help! God created us to need each other. He has composed the church so that we aren’t sufficient in ourselves, but need each other’s gifts. So, go to a brother or sister in Christ and ask them, “Can you help me to understand this passage? I’m having trouble.” Or, “I think this is what this passage says. But, can you tell me what you think?” This is also the place where study bibles or commentaries can be useful. In a way, they can be like godly Christians in written form. Instead of talking in person, you are talking by reading. Ask for help.

So, those are four principles for studying difficult passages: Pray, Examine the Context, Let Scripture Interpret Scripture, and Ask for Help. Any questions before we apply this to a passage of Scripture?

Let’s put these principles in practice. Look with me at Matthew 12 on the inside of your handout.

**Worked Example of a Difficult Passage: Matthew 12:31-32**

“31 Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. 32 And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.”

What questions come to mind as you read this passage?

1. **Pray**

[Pray briefly. Here is an example: O Father, we come to you and ask you to open our eyes to understand your Word. We are beggars before you. So, please help us. Please feed us with your Word. In Jesus’ name, Amen.]

1. **Examine the context.**

What is the larger context? What is the book of Matthew about? *[Answer: the book of Matthew is a Gospel which was written to show us Jesus’ ministry so that we might know that he is the Messiah. He came to save Israel from their sins by dying and rising again.]*

What is the immediate context? *[Answer: The Pharisees are claiming that Jesus casts out demons by Satan and his kingdom. But Jesus says that he casts out demons by the Spirit of God and his kingdom. Jesus begins v. 31 with “Therefore,” showing us that his teaching on the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is in reference to the Pharisees. This helps us to understand that Jesus is speaking about a particular situation and a particular people who are blaspheming against the Holy Spirit: the Pharisees who claim Jesus’ works are of Satan.]*

1. **Let Scripture Interpret Scripture**

First, let’s *diagnose the difficulty*. What is the difficulty that we are trying to solve in these verses? *[Answer: What is the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and how does it apply now? And, why is it worse than blaspheming Jesus, the Son of Man?]*

Second, let’s *find* *relevant passages*. For the sake of time, I’m going to give you some passages. Starting with the book of Matthew, remember Jesus’ audience. Jesus is speaking specifically about the Pharisees who claimed that his ministry was of Satan. In Matthew 23, Jesus calls out these Pharisees as hypocrites, blind guides, greedy, self-indulgent, lawless, and murderers of the prophets.

Then, let’s look at passages in other books of the Bible. In Mark 3:29 and Luke 12:10, Jesus speaks about the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. In this case, Matthew is actually the clearest Gospel on what the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is, so we won’t spend more time in Mark and Luke today. But, perhaps the most helpful passage on understanding what Jesus *doesn’t* mean by blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is 1 Timothy 1:12-16. In 1 Timothy 1:13, Paul says, “I was a *blasphemer*, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I *received mercy* because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief.” Now, this passage is crucial in understanding Matthew 12. If anyone could have been charged with blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, it was Paul! BUT, he received mercy.

Now, we can *synthesize* these passages. In light of God’s mercy on Paul, what does this passage *not* mean? *[Answer: blasphemy of the Holy Spirit cannot apply to those who repent and believe in Jesus. If you are a Christian, you have not committed the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit!]*

So what is blasphemy of the Holy Spirit then? *[Answer: In light of the context of the Pharisees in Matthew’s Gospel, it does apply to those who live in unrepentant, obstinate, continual opposition to the Holy Spirit’s work through Jesus. In other words, a person who only speaks a word against Jesus (like Paul) has not blasphemed the Holy Spirit. But a person who is unrepentantly hardened to the Holy Spirit (the Pharisees in Matthew 12) has blasphemed the Holy Spirit. This is a person who never repents and believes in Jesus. Blasphemy of the Son of Man is temporary, while blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is unrepentant.]*

1. **Ask for Help.**

So, what do you all think? Anything that you would add to what I’ve already said? [allow a couple responses.]

The ESV Study Bible sums it up well in its comments on the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit in Luke 12. It calls blasphemy of the Son of Man, “disrespectful words hastily spoken against Jesus.” Then it calls blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, “the persistent and unrepentant resistance against the work of the Holy Spirit and his message concerning Jesus.” The Study Bible ends with an encouraging note: “Christians often worry that they have committed this sin, but such concern is itself evidence of an openness to the work of the Spirit.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Amen.

Any questions or comments about the process of studying difficult passages?

**Studying Familiar Passages**

Name some familiar passages in the Bible. Why are they familiar?

The danger with studying difficult passages is that we are left in confusion. But the danger with studying familiar passages is that we are left with assumption. Assumption kills our study of the bible. It can lead to dry bible studies, or even worse, distortion of what the Bible actual says.

Now, familiar passages are often familiar for good reasons. I want to stress that. I am not saying that familiarity is a bad thing. It is a good thing to be familiar with the Bible. Here are 5 principles that keep us from assuming unhelpfully at God’s Word in familiar passages:

1. **Pray.**

Yet again, the first step we need to take in studying the Bible is prayer. Familiar passages grow dull, not because the passages are dull, but because our hearts are dull. So, how do you soften a heart that is growing hard? Pray.

1. **Don’t Assume, Ask.**

“Don’t assume, ask” is a phrase that is often used in counseling people through conflict. The best interpreters are those who ask the most questions. Questions like the ones we asked about difficult passages. What is the context? What is the structure of the passage? What do the words mean? How does it compare or contrast with other passages in the Bible? How does this apply to me? Treat every passage of the Bible like it’s the first time you’ve read it. “Don’t Assume, Ask.”. And then try answer your questions by yourself. Give your best answer before you turn to a commentary or other study tool.

1. **Search for Surprises.**

Assumption almost always settles in when a person ceases to be surprised by God’s Word. A surprise is something that is said or done that goes against our expectations. So, another way to search for surprises in the Bible is to ask the question, “What would I *expect* God to say here?”

Examine your expectations. How does the passage challenge or bring clarity to how you view God, yourself, the culture, the world, etc.? At the heart of every major Christian doctrine is paradox: the trinity, the incarnation, the cross. These are all paradoxes—or another way of saying it is, these are all surprises. How can God be three in one? How can God become a man? How can the God-man die for sinners? Search for surprises.

1. **Meditate.**

The Puritan Pastor Thomas Watson said, “The reason we come away so cold from reading the word is, because we do not warm ourselves at the fire of meditation.”[[3]](#footnote-3) In order to prevent a cold response to familiar passages, we must meditate on them. A good definition of meditation comes from Don Whitney’s book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. He says that meditation is “deep thinking on truths and spiritual realities revealed in Scripture for the purpose of understanding, application, and prayer.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Prayer is foundational to meditation. When you pray a passage, you are meditating on it. Throughout a passage, turn your reading into prayers of praise, confession, thanksgiving, and prayer for yourself and others. At the same time, repetition is also required for meditation. Sometimes, it takes a long time for a passage to sink in. Read a passage over a second time. Or perhaps, read the same passage once a day for a whole week. The longer you sit in the passage, the more you will see that it is full of riches you may not have initially seen. So, meditate.

1. **Express.**

Expression deepens impression. You tend to remember things better when you express them verbally. Moreover, you tend to be impressed, or moved, by things when you express them verbally. For example, the more you share the gospel with others, the more you remember and are impressed by the gospel. Have you ever noticed that? Expression deepens impression.

One way to express a passage is to share it with your friends, your family, and your fellow church members. Another way to express is by journaling. Writing helps thinking. Expression deepens impression. Express the passage.

So, those are five principles for studying familiar passages: Pray, Don’t Assume Ask, Search for Surprises, Meditate, and Express. Any questions about those principles?

OK, now let’s seek to apply these principles to a familiar passage.

**Worked Example of a Familiar Passage: Psalm 23:1**

“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

Why do you think this verse is so familiar? [Wait for answers].

1. **Pray**

[Pray briefly. Here is an example: O Father, we come to you and ask you to open our eyes to understand your Word. We are beggars before you. So, please help us. Please feed us with your Word. In Jesus’ name, Amen.]

1. **Don’t Assume, Ask**

What are some good questions for us to ask about this passage? [Wait for answers] We’ll just look at two questions that will help us bring the passage out more: Who is the author? What is the context?

First, who is the author? [David]. Why is this important? [David was the King of Israel]. Psalm 23 is the prayer of King David. And he is praying this Psalm about himself: he says, “The LORD is *my* shepherd” not “*our* shepherd.” Therefore, in this verse, David is speaking of God as his *own* personal shepherd.

Now, this perspective totally changes the way we read this verse! Before Psalm 23 can ever be about us, it must first be about the King. King David died. But Jesus is our King. He is described as the “son of David” in the New Testament (cf. Matt. 1:1). He is the eternal King. Therefore, the best application of this passage today isn’t first to us, but to Jesus.

So, what does that mean for us? *[Answer: It means that God can never be your shepherd unless you are under the reign of King Jesus. A non-Christian on their death-bed can’t take confidence in this verse until they repent and believe in Jesus. But if you have repented and believed in Jesus, you can take great comfort in this verse.]*

Second, what is the context?

*[(1) Provision in v. 2: God leads David like a sheep having access to grass and water.*

*(2) Spiritual provision in v. 3: God leads David spiritually so that his soul is restored and he goes down paths of righteousness.*

*(3) Protection through death in v. 4: God protects David in the face of death.*

*(4) Victory over enemies in v. 5: “table” implies that he is sitting comfortably with his enemies around him. Moreover, he is ‘anointed’ which shows that he is established as the King of the land.*

*(5) Temporal and Eternal Hope in v. 6: God will be with David throughout his life and David will dwell with God forever.]*

So, what does that mean for us? *[Answer: If we are in Christ, our King, then we know that God will take care of every single want we might have in this life: he will give us what we need physically, spiritually, and in the face of death and enemies, and we will be with God forever. Now, that changes the way you see “want”! If you are a Christian, God will take care of every need you have. “I shall not want.”]*

1. **Search for Surprises**

What is surprising about this verse? *[Answer: (1) King David is calling God his shepherd. The King, the most powerful person in Israel, is calling himself a weak and helpless sheep who depends on God as his shepherd. (2) The God of the universe cares for King David personally. The God of the universe takes interest in individual people.]*

The implications of these surprises are wonderful. No matter how great our status is in this world, we are always mere sheep depending on God our shepherd through Christ our King. In every season of your life, you are a sheep. Even greater, God is your personal shepherd in Christ. God cares intimately for every single sheep in his fold. He cares for you. Isn’t that wonderful? He knows you personally and knows your struggles and he is your shepherd.

1. **Meditate**

We’ve basically been meditating this whole time through repetition. But, one way we haven’t meditated yet on the passage is through prayer. What are some ways that you can pray this passage? *[Answers: Praise God for Jesus, our great King! Confess your dependence on God as a sheep. Thank God that he cares for you personally. Pray for others to know him as their Shepherd.]*

Finally,

1. **Express**

What are some ways that you can express this verse this week? [Answers: share it with a loved one, etc.]. How has this passage encouraged you in the past, or even right now?

**Conclusion**

Looking into God’s Word is like looking into the ocean. The ocean is deep, wide and glorious. In the daytime, you can see more easily into it. But at night, it’s more difficult to see into. You’ll need more tools in order to see. Regardless, it is just as deep in the day as it is at night. Similarly, God’s Word is sometimes easier and sometimes more difficult to look into, but it is always deep and wide and glorious. Let’s dive into it. Let’s pray.

1. Quote taken from Luther’s letter, “A Simple Way to Pray.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *ESV Study Bible* (Crossway), pg. 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Quoted in Don Whitney’s *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)