

Effective Bible Study IV

(By Topic, Word or Character)

We come to an important, but easily misused method of Bible study. While thorough Bible study requires us to do the kind of investigations we are about to consider, we should not make them the primary kind of study we do, and we should be aware of the many ways in which we can go astray. For a good guide to avoiding the fallacies frequently committed, we recommend the little book *Exegetical Fallacies* by D.A. Carson

Word Studies: The Bible contains about 6000 different English words translated from over 10,000 Greek and Hebrew words. The more accurate our knowledge of these words the more precise our understanding of the Bible.

Steps To Effective Word Studies:

1.) Look up the word to be studied in two or three dictionaries.

An English dictionary can be of some use, but remember, most English dictionaries define words as we use them today. Refer to at least two Bible dictionaries to get a good idea of how the word was used in Bible times.

2.) Write down the definition.

3.) Look the word up in a concordance and look up the verses that use the word. Write down the verses that seem to use the word with special emphasis. Remember to read each verse in its context. Bible translator John Wycliffe (1324-1384) made the following comments:

*"It shall greatly helpe ye to
understande Scripture,
If thou mark
not only what is spoken or wrytten,
But of whom,
And to whom,
With what words,
At what time,
Where,
To what intent,
With what circumstances,
Considering what goeth before
And what followeth after."*

4.) Write a summary paragraph of what the word means and its significance.

Sample Study On The Word Meek:

Meek - "*Showing patience and humility; gentle.*" -- American Heritage Dictionary
Meekness - *The meaning of prautes is not readily expressed in English, for the terms meekness & mildness, commonly used, suggest weakness and pusillanimity to a greater or less extent, whereas prautes does nothing of the kind. Nevertheless, it is difficult to find a rendering less open to objection than `meekness'; `gentleness' has been suggested, but as prautes describes a condition of mind and heart, and as `gentleness' is appropriate rather to actions, this word is no better than that used in both English Versions. It must be clearly understood, therefore, that the meekness manifested by the Lord and commended to the believer is the fruit of power. The common assumption is that when a man is meek it is because he cannot help himself; but the Lord was `meek' because he had the infinite resources of God at His command. Described negatively, meekness is the opposite to self-assertiveness and self-interest; it is equanimity of spirit that is neither elated nor cast down, simply because it is not occupied with self at all.* (from Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words)

New Testament Usage:

Matt 5:5 *Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.* This is taken from Jesus Beatitudes. All of which are attitudes we choose and not a persons natural disposition.

2 Cor 10:1 *Now I, Paul, myself am pleading with you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ...* Christ was meek, but was not weak.

Col 3:12 *Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering;* Once again, meekness is an attitude we choose to possess and it is found here among a list of qualities we are to manifest toward other people.

James 1:21 *Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.* Meekness is the proper attitude with which to hear the word of God. It readiness to submit to Him.

James 3:13 *Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom.* The larger context of this verse is important. James says the meekness of wisdom comes upon us from above which means we must seek it in prayer. Furthermore he sets it in opposition to the wisdom of this world which introduces all kinds of turmoil into human relationships.

1 Pet 3:15 *But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness...*We should not be overbearing in teaching the gospel to others.

Summary: Meekness is an attitude we choose to have toward God and other people. Toward God it means surrendering my will to Him and humbly accepting His direction. Toward other people it means using my strengths to serve not intimidate nor manipulate. It suggests a willingness to put other's interest before my own and is the opposite of being overbearing. As an attribute ascribed to Christ it is a measure of spiritual maturity that every believer should strive to possess.

Topical Studies: A topical study seeks to understand what the Bible says about a particular issue, theme or area of thought. It differs from a word study in that the topic may be called by a term which the Bible does not even use. For example, the word abortion is nowhere found in the Bible, but that does not mean the topic isn't addressed. The same could be said of such topics as: capital punishment, rearing children, etc.

The basic strategy involved in topical study is to find all the passages in the Bible that shed light on the topic. The problem for the new Christian is that it requires a relatively broad knowledge to know where to find those passages. However, there are some tools that can help such as a concordance.

Topical studies can be very useful, however there are some inherent dangers to avoid.

- 1.) Using the Bible to prove my point.
- 2.) Ignoring the context of a given passage.
- 3.) Failing to explore all the Bible has to say about a given topic.

Sample Topical Study On Capital Punishment.

Instituted by God - Gen 9:5-6 *Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God he made man.*

Some capital offenses under The Law of Moses:

Premeditated Murder: Ex 21:12-14 *He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death. However, if he did not lie in wait, but God delivered him into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place where he may flee. But if a man acts with premeditation against his neighbor, to kill him by treachery, you shall take him from My altar, that he may die.*

Idolatry: Lev 20:2 *Again, you shall say to the children of Israel: Whoever of the children of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell in Israel, who gives any of his descendants to Molech, he shall surely be put to death. The people of the land shall stone him with stones.*

Cursing One's Parents: Lev 20:9 *For everyone who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death. He has cursed his father or his mother. His blood shall be upon him.*

Various Sexual Frauds or Sins: Lev 20:20-11 *The man who commits adultery with another man's wife, he who commits adultery with his neighbor's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress, shall surely be put to death. 'The man who lies with his father's wife has uncovered his father's nakedness; both of them shall surely be put to death. Their blood shall be upon them.*

Note: A full study on this topic would require investigation into a number of important details, some of which I feel compelled to insert here. Death penalties were often

interpreted (apparently with God's approval) as being maximum penalties and a death sentence was not always required. For example, consider David's great sins. In other places exile was substituted for death. This means that a judge was to exercise discretion in deciding punishment. This is not relativism—it is the way common law works. Even so, laws appearing to many moderns to be inhumanly harsh must be acknowledged by Christians as just and holy and that God was right to require the death penalty under Moses the way that He did. In other words, no consistent Christian can "apologize" for the treatment that anyone received under the law of God in the Old Testament, whether that person was an adulterer, homosexual, or necromancer. The nation of Israel was in covenant with God *as a holy people*, and their holiness code required certain things of them. The standard was strict and high. The church is in that position today, but the Christian church does not have (and ought not to have) the power of the sword. This is why in certain instances the New Testament substitutes withdrawal of fellowship for execution. God's people are still summoned to holiness, and that holiness is still defined by the Bible. The standard is still high and still grounded in the character of God.

It is also vital that we grasp the way in which the gospel gloriously complicates the matter. With the coming of Christ and His sacrifice on the cross for sins and sinners of all sorts, a number of things are altered. The woman taken in adultery is told to, go and sin no more. The former homosexuals in the church at Corinth were told to rejoice in their forgiveness, not to volunteer for execution, nor kill themselves because they deserved to die. Christ came to save the world, not destroy it.

Finally a distinction has to be made between crimes and sins. While there is usually an overlap between the two, there are differences. When a crime is committed, it is the God-given obligation of the state to become involved as we shall see next.

In the New Testament the role of enforcing criminal violation of civil law, including capital punishment, is given to the civil government - Rom 13:1-4 *Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.*

Summary and Conclusion: Capital punishment has precedent in scripture. It is a punishment suitable to those guilty of murder and other atrocities. Today it is to be carried out by civil government which serves as an instrument of God to maintain order in society.

Biographical Studies:

Three Steps

- 1.) Gather all the passages that refer to them by looking in a concordance. Be advised that there will often be many people sharing one name and sometimes one person with multiple names.
- 2.) Ask questions: Find out about their ancestry and especially their parents. What events influenced them early in their life. What kind of work did they do. Was there a critical point reached in their life. What character traits led to their downfall or their greatness. Were his companions helpful or hurtful to him. What contribution did this person lend to God's scheme of redemption. What spiritual habits are revealed about them i.e. did they pray, study or meditate or worship etc. What can I learn from this person?
- 3.) Write a paragraph summarizing their life, how it contributes to God's plan of redemption and what you have learned from their example.

Sample Biographical Study Of John The Baptist:

Subject of Prophecy - Isa 40:3-5 & Mal 4:5-6

Fulfilled - Matt 3:3 & Matt 11:13-14

Angel announced birth - Luke 1:11-20

Lived in the desert - 1:63, 80

Bore witness to Christ - John 5:33

Baptized Christ - Matt 3:13-16

Beheaded by Herod - Matt 14:3-12

Characteristics: Courageous (Matt 14:3,4) Righteous (Mark 6:20) Faithful (Acts 13:24,25)

John was born of righteous parents who trained him well. He became a preacher who, in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, called upon Israel to repent and in so doing, prepared the way for Christ. He baptized Christ and bore witness to Him as one greater than himself, thus introducing Him to Israel and from that point became less and less of a figure as Christ's role increased. He was beheaded by Herod after exposing him as an adulterer. We learn from John the importance of using our abilities and appointments to point men to Christ rather than to self.