

## How to study the Bible: Context

The cure for boredom...

*How can you tell if someone loves you?*

Perhaps a better title would be “How **I** study the Bible”. I have had people comment both about how much they learn (and enjoy) the Bible when I'm teaching, and how they wished they could do that when studying on their own. In this short series I will demonstrate the process and the tools that I use in my study, discuss some of the general principles that should guide our study, and perhaps even have some fun along the way.

We'll start with “context”. For most of my life I studied scripture one tiny piece at a time. Actually, we pretty much have to do it that way because each study session is relatively short. The problem was that I learned about all the various parts pretty well but didn't have a clear sense of how they all fit together, and lacking that, how could I have a solid understanding of the broader themes and overall message?

Ever since I was a young teen I wondered about the meaning of “love”. One day many years later I was still working on that problem when I came to the passage in Luke 10 where Jesus is talking with an expert in the law of God about how to inherit eternal life. “What does the law say?” Jesus replied. Out of the law for God's people came the very simple answer: *love*; love God and love your neighbor. Jesus says “Right! You've got it.” Then the lawyer asked “Who is my neighbor?” and Jesus responds with his story about an enemy alien who rescued a local citizen who had been beaten and robbed.

So in His response Jesus gives an **example** of *love*. This does not define love but does help us learn what it is like. Notice that the question wasn't about *love*, it was about living forever and then about whom one is required to love. If I had stopped at verse 28 what I would have learned about *love* is that it is a prerequisite for eternal life -- and that is a very useful bit of information.

How can you tell if someone loves you? By what they do! But what is love like? How do I know if I'm doing it right? And then the question came to me: what did that word “love” mean in the minds of Jesus and that lawyer? I had been all

through the New Testament and learned about the four different Greek words for love, but Jesus and the lawyer weren't Greeks, they were Jews and probably speaking to each other in Aramaic. To understand this I need to look not just at the context of the English translation of a story written in Greek about a conversation conducted in Aramaic between two Jewish men who are discussing the law written in Hebrew. How can I sort this out 2,000 years later across a vast geographic and cultural divide? I'm pretty good with English, learned a tiny bit about Greek and even less about Hebrew, and all I know about Aramaic is that it is closely related, and similar, to Hebrew and that very little of the Bible is actually written using that language. But we can't let that stop us, this is the word of God and if we hope to understand His message to us we must press on.

We know they were discussing law from the Old Testament, let's find the specific passage(s). If your Bible doesn't have a note in Luke pointing you to the source of those quotations there are online Bible study tools that make it easy.

My favorite, and the one we'll use most often for this series on how to study the Bible is <<http://classic.net.bible.org/>>. Navigate to Luke 10, and use the footnotes to find what we need. The lawyer quotes two verses from Old Testament law: Deuteronomy 6:5, and Leviticus 19:18. In looking at those verses we will want to look closely at what they say, but to fully understand them we'll need to know more than what the individual words mean and how they are used in the sentence. What is being discussed in the surrounding text? Who is speaking, and to whom? What occasion or event is being discussed? Questions like these will help turn mysterious passages and obscure oddities into vivid understanding.

Deuteronomy 6:5

**Who is speaking:** God through Moses - Deuteronomy 1:5-6, 31:1-2

**Speaking to:** the people of Israel

**When:** after 40 years of wandering, before crossing into the promised land - 1:3

Leviticus 19:18

**Who is speaking:** God through Moses - 1:1-2, 4:1, 19:1-2

**Speaking to:** the people of Israel

**When:** at Mount Sinai, before 40 years of wandering - 26:46, 27:34

Context, Translation, Search tools, Counts (common vs. rare; obscurity not necessarily an indicator of unimportance)

**Next week:** Your topic here: \_\_\_\_\_