

Lesson 4: Word Studies

I. Introduction

The word is the cornerstone of all language. Used in various combinations, words convey ideas, actions, events, and emotions. Thus, in our study of the Bible it is important that we learn the art of the word study. While this is an essential element of biblical interpretation, it's also one of the most abused. There is a common saying among interpreters, "He knows enough Greek to be dangerous." Giving a man a saw does not make him a master carpenter; neither does the ability to look up a word in a lexicon make one a stellar Bible student. Yet when used properly, the word study is a tool that can yield fantastic results. In this lesson you will learn to use this vital tool to mine the depths of the vocabulary of God.

- How can word studies be misused or even abused?
- Why is it important to remember that the Bible contains sentences, and not simply words?

II. Tools of the Trade

The following resources are immensely helpful for a word study:

- NASB Concordance (This is indexed with Strong's Numbers)
- Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary
- Study Bibles (such as the ESVSB and MacArthur Study Bible)
- Good Biblical Commentaries

Note: blueletterbible.org is also an excellent resource for word studies, and includes many of the tools mentioned above.

III. Common Word Study Mistakes

- A. **Assuming words that share the same root must also have the same meaning.** Think of *adult* and *adultery*, or *terrible* and *terrific*. In Biblical Hebrew, the word for *bread* has the same root as *fight*, and *angel* has the same root as *work, occupation*.

- B. **Not being mindful of the migration of language.** For example, compare the modern usage of *gay* with its usage a mere hundred years ago. Though this is not a major issue in the New Testament, which was written within a fifty-year span, it is a big consideration in the Old Testament, which was written over a thousand-year period.
- C. **Placing undue emphasis on the origin of words.** For instance, 1 Corinthians 4:1 says, ***Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.*** The term *servant* comes from the term under-rower, leading many to conclude that Paul is drawing upon nautical language. But just as a pineapple is neither pine nor apple, an under-rower is neither under nor a rower; it simply means “servant.” When determining the meaning of a word, look at the present context and usage, not necessarily its origin.
- D. **Reading modern usage back into ancient words.** In Romans 3:18 we read, ***There is no fear of God before their eyes.*** The Greek word for fear is *phobos* and the word for God is *Theos*. This might make us think, “that sounds like *theophobia*! That means they had no irrational fear of God—that’s a good thing!” As ridiculous as this sounds, it has been done.
- E. **Taking a “salad bar” approach to dictionaries and lexicons.** This happens when you see five different definitions of a word and simply select the one which helps the verse make your point.
- F. **Stretching the Meaning.** Crawling and walking both use legs and involve motion, but it would be a mistake to say that walking and crawling are synonyms or even that they have overlapping meanings. We should not stretch definitions to make words say things they don’t mean. For instance, it is incorrect to say that *fearing God* means loving Him deeply and passionately.

IV. Principles and Procedure for Word Studies

The following principles do not always have to be used in the same order, but each of them should be considered when doing a word study.

- A. Use multiple translations to determine which words merit a word study.
- B. Consult a variety of sources including dictionaries, concordances, and commentaries.
- C. Understand that different authors use words in different ways.
- D. Ask yourself why the author chose to use one word and not another.

- E. Consider the meaning of a word in relation to adjacent words. Is there an accompanying word that shapes its meaning?
- F. Determine whether the word should be taken literally or figuratively.
- G. Remember, Context is King! Always test your conclusion against the context.

V. An Old Testament Example

To help illustrate this procedure we will look at Proverbs 8:13,

“The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; Pride and arrogance and the evil way And the perverted mouth, I hate.”

- A. **Use multiple translations to determine which words merit a word study.** I look up the verse in several versions on blueletterbible.org and note that there is a great deal of consistency across translations. I will choose to study the word *fear*, since it seems to be a key word.
- B. **Consult a variety of sources including dictionaries, concordances, and commentaries.** In this case, I find the Strong’s reference number (H3374) on blueletterbible.org, and consult Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary. Towards the end of the definition under the heading of nouns I read:

“Fear; reverence.” The noun yir’ah appears 45 times in the Old Testament. It may mean “fear” of men (Deut. 2:25), of things (7:25), of situations (Jonah 1:10), and of God (Jonah 1:12); it may also mean “reverence” of God (Gen. 20:11).

On blueletterbible.org I see the following Outline of Biblical Usage:

- 1) *fear, terror, fearing*
 - a) *fear, terror*
 - b) *awesome or terrifying thing (object causing fear)*
 - c) *fear (of God), respect, reverence, piety*
 - d) *revered*

- C. **Understand that different authors use words in different ways.** Starting with Solomon’s writings, we observe that every usage of “fear” is followed by “of the Lord.” However, in the earlier Law of Moses there are no instances of the phrase, “fear of the Lord,” but there is the “fear of God.” In Job and in the Psalms this word is translated as both “reverence” and “fear.” In the later prophetic literature its usage includes the translation, “frightened.”

- Given this information, which definitions can we rule out for Proverbs 8:13?

fear, terror, fearing

a) *fear, terror*

b) *awesome or terrifying thing (object causing fear)*

c) *fear (of God), respect, reverence, piety*

d) *revered*

- D. **Ask yourself why the author chose to use one word and not another.** Look up “fear” in a concordance or do a search on blueletterbible.org to discover the different words the author could have chosen. You will notice that the other available Hebrew words are usually associated with *terror, dread, and being afraid*.

Once we have determined the words an author had at his disposal, we need to consider his purpose in writing. In the Old Testament especially, we have to be mindful of the impact of genre on our word study.

- For instance, how would the concept of *fear* as used by the prophets differ from the *fear* found in the wisdom literature (such as Proverbs)?
- How might both of these differ from its usage in the Law?

- E. **Consider the meaning of a word in relation to adjacent words.** For instance, when “body” is accompanied by “of work” it has a very narrow and specific meaning. As we noted in our word study so far, in the book of Proverbs “fear” is always accompanied by “of the Lord.” This modifier leads us to select the third definition from Strong’s:

c) *fear (of God), respect, reverence, piety*

- F. **Determine whether the word should be taken literally or figuratively.** Is this word (or group of words) functioning technically, or is it a figure of speech or other idiomatic expression? For example, “in a minute” technically means *in 60 seconds*, but idiomatically it simply means *a short amount of time*. Similarly, “the fear of the Lord” is an idiomatic expression used across Scripture. The context shows us that the word “fear” should not be isolated to indicate literal fear or terror.

- G. **Remember, Context is King! Always test your conclusion against the context.** Insert your chosen definition of *reverential, respect, piety* back into the verse to be sure that it makes sense, like this:

Proverbs 8:13 ***“The fear [respect, reverence, piety] of the LORD is to hate evil; Pride and arrogance and the evil way And the perverted mouth, I hate.***

VI. A New Testament Example

In this section, we will examine Colossians 3:21,

Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart.

- A. **Use multiple translations to determine which words merit a word study.** An easy way to do this on blueletterbible.org is to put your cursor over the “Tools” icon and then click on the “Bibles” option that pops up.

The New International Version	New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update	The Good News Translation
21 Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.	21 Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart.	21 Parents, do not irritate your children, or they will become discouraged.

- Are there any words that seem to alter the meaning of the text?

- B. **Consult a variety of sources including dictionaries, concordances, and commentaries.** To look up the dictionary definitions on blueletterbible.org, hold the cursor over the “Tools” icon, and then click “Interlinear.” We will look up the definition of “Fathers” by clicking on the “Strong’s” number next to this word (in this case it will be G3962), and we’ll see the following Outline of Biblical Usage:

1) generator or male ancestor

- 1)** *either the nearest ancestor: father of the corporeal nature, natural fathers, both parents*
- 2)** *a more remote ancestor, the founder of a family or tribe, progenitor of a people, forefather: so Abraham is called, Jacob and David*
 - 1)** *fathers i.e. ancestors, forefathers, founders of a nation*
 - 3)** *one advanced in years, a senior*

II) metaph.

- 1)** *the originator and transmitter of anything*
 - 1)** *the authors of a family or society of persons animated by the same spirit as himself*
 - 2)** *one who has infused his own spirit into others, who actuates and governs their minds*
- 2)** *one who stands in a father's place and looks after another in a paternal way*
- 3)** *a title of honor*
 - 1)** *teachers, as those to whom pupils trace back the knowledge and training they have received*
 - 2)** *the members of the Sanhedrin, whose prerogative it was by virtue of the wisdom and experience in which they excelled, to take charge of the interests of others*

III) God is called the Father

- 1)** *of the stars, the heavenly luminaries, because he is their creator, upholder, ruler*
- 2)** *of all rational and intelligent beings, whether angels or men, because he is their creator, preserver, guardian and protector*
 - 1)** *of spiritual beings and of all men*
- 3)** *of Christians, as those who through Christ have been exalted to a specially close and intimate relationship with God, and who no longer dread him as a stern judge of sinners, but revere him as their reconciled and loving Father*
- 4)** *the Father of Jesus Christ, as one whom God has united to himself in the closest bond of love and intimacy, made acquainted with his purposes, appointed to explain and carry out among men the plan of salvation, and made to share also in his own divine nature*
 - 1)** *by Jesus Christ himself*
 - 2)** *by the apostles*

- Which of these above definitions can we rule out for our text?

Consulting The MacArthur Study Bible we find the following explanation for the logic of the “parents” translation:

6:4 fathers. *The word technically refers to male parents, but was also used of parents in general. Since Paul had been speaking of both parents (vv. 1–3) he probably had both in mind here. The same word is used in Heb. 11:23 for Moses’ parents.*¹

- Do you agree with the above conclusion? Why or why not?
- If you disagree, what other sources could you consult to further your study and understanding of this text?

C. **Understand that different authors use words in different ways.** Given the many uses of the term “father,” it may be helpful to narrow any search to Paul’s usage alone. If we scroll down below the Outline of Biblical Usage (after clicking the Strong’s number beside “father”) we find every occurrence of *patēr* in the New Testament. If we look only at the books Paul wrote (Romans through Philemon) we will notice that this word is always translated as *father*.

- How should the above impact our understanding of *patēr* in Colossians 3:21?

D. **Ask yourself why the author chose to use one word and not another.** To see what other words Paul could have used, we’ll use blueletterbible.org to search for the word “parents.” Scrolling down we quickly see that “parents” is used in Colossians 3:20 – the verse directly before ours. If we click on “Tools” and “Interlinear” we see that the word used in 3:20 is not *patēr*, but *goneus*, which can be translated *Fathers, parent, the parents*.

¹MacArthur, John Jr: *The MacArthur Study Bible*. electronic ed. Nashville : Word Pub., 1997, c1997, S. Eph 6:4

- How does this information shape our understanding of how *patēr* should be translated in Colossians 3:21?

E. **Consider the meaning of a word in relation to adjacent words.** In order to do this, we might want to look at the larger structure of the household code, of which our verse is one part. Let's read Colossians 3:18-4:1.

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ¹⁹ Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them. ²⁰ Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord. ²¹ Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart. ²² Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. ²³ Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. ²⁵ For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality. ¹ Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.

- List who is addressed in each command.
- Notice that the commands come in pairs. Who is addressed first in each pair of commands?
- Given the structure of parallel commands, does it seem more appropriate to translate *patēr* as *parents* or as *fathers*? Explain your answer.

F. **Determine whether the word should be taken literally or figuratively.** This is almost always done by looking at the context in which our word is found.

- How does the command to children help us to discern whether *fathers* is literal or idiomatic?

- How does the larger household code help us determine how to take this word?

G. Remember, Context is King! Always test your conclusion against the context.

- Does the translation of *patēr* as *father* seem sensible in the context? Why or why not?

I. Thought Questions

- A. Should the fact that there is scholarly disagreement about translation discourage us from performing word studies?
- B. Why is it important to subject all word studies to the last step of testing your conclusion against the context?

II. Application

- A. Use the method given above to conduct your own word studies.
- B. Always take care not to simply rely on one resource.
- C. Show discernment when you read or hear conclusions about the meaning of a word.

III. Assignment

Select two words from Titus 3:4-7 and perform word studies using the procedure we learned in this lesson:

- A. Use multiple translations to determine which words merit a word study.
- B. Consult a variety of sources including dictionaries, concordances, and commentaries.
- C. Understand that different authors use words in different ways.
- D. Ask yourself why the author chose to use one word and not another.

- E. Consider the meaning of a word in relation to adjacent words. Is there an accompanying word that shapes its meaning?
- F. Determine whether the word should be taken literally or figuratively.
- G. Remember, Context is King! Always test your conclusion against the context.

Preaching Assignment: Read book introductions in two study Bibles and answer historical background questions; outline the book and identify where your passage fits.

IV. Conclusion

Word studies can be laborious and difficult, but they are well worth the work, often yielding great insights. Also, thanks to resources like blueletterbible.org, you can now learn in a few minutes what once took pastors several hours of tedious study.