

THE



BIBLE STUDY



HANDBOOK



A Comprehensive Guide  
to an Essential Practice

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## 9

## Curiosity



I noticed the moving sale sign out of the corner of my eye while I was running through my neighborhood on a Saturday morning. I usually try to avoid stopping at yard sales because I inevitably bring home some great “bargain” that soon finds its way to the Goodwill store. But this sign was in front of a classy home that I’ve often admired from the curb. I hesitated to stop in the midst of my run, but I reasoned with myself that the owners of that beautiful house might have some great treasures. Honestly, more than my desire to find a bargain, my curiosity about what their home looked like on the inside and what very wealthy people might be getting rid of is what propelled me up their long driveway in all my sweaty glory.

Curiosity has that effect on us. It causes us to override other objections and venture a little further to investigate. Curiosity is the reason that Wikipedia is one of the top websites in the world. Curiosity fuels inquisitive behaviors such as exploration, investigation and learning. Scientists, artists, inventors, creative writers, journalists, explorers and others driven by the desire to know new things enrich our world with their discoveries, innovations and insights. Likewise, social gatherings and travel tours are made more lively and interesting when curious people are present.

Posing a question about our surroundings or the people we encounter often leads to rich discoveries. I recently found myself on a road trip with a group of women from my church. One woman, April, was relatively new to the church, and this was my first opportunity to interact with her. I asked her a few questions. “I can tell you have an accent, but I don’t recognize it. Where did you grow up?”

“Kenya,” she replied.

“What brought you to the United States?”

I expected that she would say, “I have family here,” or “I came for college.” Instead I was mildly shocked when April said, “Commercial pilot school.” When I picture the pilots in the cockpit of my plane, I have never envisioned an African woman behind the controls.

As the mile markers on the interstate sped by, April and I engaged in animated conversation. My initial questions led to many more—about flight school, her life in Kenya and her other interests. I learned that April is an avid soccer player; she sings in a gospel choir and acts in community theater. The more I asked, the more I discovered about this talented, smart, confident young woman.

At its root, curiosity is an emotion. It is the desire to know or learn, an urge to seek and find, a drive to know new things.

Deeply curious people put themselves in the posture of a learner almost all of the time. They are full of questions, always wanting to know more and constantly expanding their understanding of all kinds of subjects. They listen and absorb information, thoughts, and perspectives different from their own.<sup>1</sup>

I am convinced that curiosity is fundamental to a vibrant life, meaningful relationships and transformative Bible study.

### **Good Little Monkey**

Children are inherently curious. Through exploring their surroundings, they come to make sense of the world. Some maintain that God-given quality into adulthood, but too many of us let curiosity languish. We are subtly (and sometimes explicitly) taught that curiosity is bothersome or even dangerous. The folk saying “Curiosity killed the cat” belies this attitude.

Remember Curious George, the cartoon monkey in children’s books? Curious George inevitably gets into trouble because he explores the world around him, often making a mess in the process. Every book in the series begins with “George was a good little monkey, but always very curious.” When reading these books to my children, I changed the sentence to “George was a good little monkey *and* always very curious” because I wanted my children to grow up with a sense of wonder about the world and the expectation that their “why?” and “how?” questions would be greeted warmly by adults, rather than brushed off.

“What distinguishes humans from all other species is that capacity to formulate questions—and to find answers that lead to more questions.”

Ronald Kotulak, “Answering the Big Questions”

Curiosity is an asset than can be developed by anyone, regardless of their economic, educational or social status. Here are some of the benefits of curiosity:

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Ortberg, *Unleashing the Power of Rubber Bands* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2008), pp. 149-50.

1. It makes your mind active instead of passive.
2. It makes your mind observant of new ideas.
3. It opens up new worlds and possibilities.
4. It fuels creativity.

The mind is like a muscle which gets stronger with exercise. Those that proactively exercise their mind through active learning, stimulating experiences and problem solving have a vibrancy that is attractive. Curiosity brings excitement into life. Furthermore, learning is more enjoyable to those who are curious. As Albert Einstein reportedly said, “The important thing is to not stop questioning. Never lose a holy curiosity.”

**“God Said It. I Believe It. That Settles It.”**

Tragically, this is not the message that many of us have received from the church. Those that ask questions are viewed as troublemakers. Historically, questions have been regarded as a challenge to the church authorities. In religious systems that are hierarchical, those in positions of leadership are viewed as speaking for God, and their interpretations of the Scripture are sacrosanct. The clergy and theologians determine what is true and right; the faithful are those who accept the teachings of the church without question. This attitude can be found in every form of Christianity whether it be Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant or Pentecostal. A popular fundamentalist bumper sticker in the 1970s captures the sentiment: “God said it. I believe it. That settles it.”

In medieval Europe, priests and monks were viewed as the only trustworthy mediators of biblical truth because the vast majority of people were illiterate. Even in denominations that trace their roots to Martin Luther, the man whose questions catalyzed the Protestant Reformation, there can be an overemphasis on learning from experts rather than asking genuine questions and seeking for answers. Christians are encouraged to study the Bible, but this often boils down to reading commentaries or the notes in a study Bible rather than studying the text directly. When I was in college, a relative criticized me for leading a Bible study with my peers. She believed that if I didn’t have a theology degree, I wasn’t qualified to teach the Bible. Her challenge reflected the unspoken assumption of many Christians: it is best to leave Bible interpretation to pastors and theologians.

One of the great untold stories of modern missions is the Christian movement among the poor in Bangladesh who have been taught to study the Bible for themselves and not rely solely on the teaching of pastors. Though predominately illiterate, inductive Bible study has been found to be widely successful. As oral learners, they are skilled at remembering what they hear. Thus, after a Bible passage is read aloud a few times, a leader can ask, “What did you observe?” and the congregation can recall all the salient details of the passage. They are invited to ask questions and then discuss together how to answer their questions from the text. Just as in a manuscript study, the leader keeps the text at the center and lets the group develop its interpretation, rather

than telling the group what the “right” answer is. Their capacity to listen, ask significant questions and think critically enables them to engage God’s Word for themselves, even though they can’t read.

### **Holy Curiosity**

Many believers have little confidence in their ability to faithfully interpret the Scripture. This lack of confidence (or fear of getting it wrong) shuts down curiosity and undermines vibrant Bible study. Is this what God intended? Does God view curiosity as threatening or impertinent? Were people meant to leave their innately inquisitive nature at the door when they join the church? I believe emphatically that this is not the case. God loves it when we ask questions of him (and the Scripture) if we are asking with a sincere and seeking heart.

Consider Abraham, who received a powerful sign of God’s covenant of grace when he asked God the question, “O LORD God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” ([Genesis 15:8-17](#)). Likewise, Moses’ relationship with God went deeper at two crucial points in the exodus story: when he asked God, “What is your name?” ([Exodus 3:13](#)), and when he asked God to “show me your glory” ([Exodus 33:18](#)). The psalmist, who lived close to God’s heart, was full of questions (e.g., [Psalm 10:1](#); [74:1](#)). The book of Habakkuk is structured as a dialogue between the prophet and the Lord. Habakkuk voices his complaints through a series of questions, then waits in faith for God’s reply ([Habakkuk 1:3](#), [13](#); [2:2](#)). Evidently, asking questions is a means of seeking God.

In the New Testament, Peter’s great sermon at Pentecost was launched by two questions from the crowd: “How is it that we hear, each of us, in our native language?” and “What does this mean?” ([Acts 2:8](#), [12](#)). When reading from the scroll of Isaiah, the Ethiopian eunuch asked Philip, “About whom . . . does the prophet say this, himself or someone else?” ([Acts 8:34](#)). Much of Paul’s letter of 1 Corinthians seems to be a response to a series of questions the church has asked him ([1 Corinthians 7:1](#), [25](#); [8:1](#); [12:1](#); [16:1](#)). In the early church, question asking led to salvation and spiritual growth.

“One cannot simply read the Bible, like other books. One must be prepared really to enquire of it. Only thus will it reveal itself. Only if we expect from it the ultimate answer, shall we receive it.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Of all the characters in the Bible, the one who seemed to love questions the most was Jesus. He commended those that stayed after public lectures and asked him about the meaning of his parables, saying that the questioners had found the secret of the kingdom of God ([Mark 4:10-11](#)). In fact, he got angry at the Pharisees when they stopped asking questions and were silent

([Mark 3:5](#)). He often answered a question with a question, moving the discussion deeper to the heart of the matter ([Mark 2:18-19, 24-25](#)). Jesus summarized his view of questions when he told his disciples specifically and clearly to “ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you” ([Matthew 7:7-8](#)). Jesus not only welcomed asking and seeking, he commanded it.

### **Posture of the Heart**

Questions are invaluable to the spiritual life. However, there is a type of question asking that is not honored by God: the question that is not accompanied by a willingness to learn or change. In the Garden of Eden, the serpent asked the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” ([Genesis 3:1](#)). His intention was to undermine God’s credibility, not to know God better. The Pharisees asked Jesus, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” not out of sincere motives but as a way of testing him ([Mark 10:2](#)).

Jesus always discerned the difference in a person’s motivations as they asked him questions, and he responded accordingly. After clearing the Temple courts, he refused to answer those who asked angrily, “By what authority are you doing these things?” ([Mark 11:27-33](#)). But to the teacher of the law who asked, “Which commandment is the first of all?” he engaged in dialogue and publicly affirmed him by saying, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” ([Mark 12:28-34](#)). The difference is the state of the heart behind the question.

The Bible places great importance on the heart. Moses urged the people of Israel to “circumcise . . . your heart . . . and do not be stubborn any longer” ([Deuteronomy 10:16](#)). When the Lord instructed Samuel to anoint the young shepherd boy David, he said, “[Mortals] look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” ([1 Samuel 16:7](#)). God promised his people that a day would come when he “will give them one heart” ([Jeremiah 32:39](#)). When challenging the religious leaders of his day, Jesus quoted [Isaiah 29:13](#): “These people . . . honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me” ([Mark 7:6](#)).

In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke), the quality of the heart is a central concern. Those that are unteachable and opposed to Jesus are described as having hard hearts. In the Gospel of Mark, this assessment is made of both the Pharisees ([Mark 3:5](#)) and the disciples ([Mark 6:52](#)). The image is filled out more extensively by Jesus’ parable of the sower, which we have already considered in chapter one. Hard hearts are like the path. The seed of God’s Word can’t even begin to grow, much less bear any fruit, because the soil is packed hard. Conversely, the good soil stands for “the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance” ([Luke 8:15](#)). This soil is soft and receptive to the Word. Because of their willingness to respond and change, people with soft hearts are able to be fruitful in their Christian lives. If we examine our hearts as we ask questions, we can weed out cynicism and self-protection, and open ourselves to sincere learning.

## Sharpen Up

Once we give ourselves permission to be fully curious and have sought the Spirit's help to approach the Bible with a soft heart, the next step is to strengthen our ability in question asking. Learning to ask good questions is a valuable skill in inductive Bible study (and in the rest of life). To grow in our question asking involves learning how to hone our questions and how to ask a broader range of questions. We will consider honing first; in the following section, we will look at various types of questions and reflect on their value for Bible study.

Honing is the process of sharpening or smoothing. Knives and swords can be honed on a whetstone to sharpen their edge and make them more effective. A stand-up comedian becomes funnier when she hones her comedic timing. In Bible study, honing our questions is the process of making them more effective. Well-formed questions unlock a passage so much more effectively than poorly formed ones. In Bible study, honed questions capture the tension of the text, are open-ended and are relevant.

Often, a question first emerges in our minds as "Huh?" or "I don't get it." Imprecise or abstract questions indicate that we have found a point of intrigue in the text but that we haven't thought about what troubles us long enough to identify what is at the core of our interest. For example, when we read at the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, "Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around this waist and ate locusts and wild honey" ([Mark 1:6](#)) we wonder, "What's up with this guy?" The text practically begs us to ask a question here. There is something strange about this character.

But "What's up?" is a very fuzzy question. To turn our curiosity into a really good question, we must identify more precisely what is strange about this description of John the Baptist. Learning how to ask sharp questions involves putting your finger on what specifically intrigues, perplexes or is unclear to you. The strange element in this verse is the camel's hair (sounds itchy) and the locusts (yuck). Our attention has been caught about how he dresses and eats. So, more helpful questions about John the Baptist would be, "Why are these details about John's clothing and diet included in the story?" or "What would this description of his appearance and eating habits mean to the people of his day?"

Exploring the answer to either of those questions will lead us to discover that Elijah was described in exactly the same way (see [2 Kings 1:7-8](#)). And once we discover that Mark is pointing out some connection between John and Elijah, a whole host of fruitful questions present themselves: Are there other aspects of this passage that allude to Elijah in some way? What is similar about the ministries of John the Baptist and Elijah? What do the prophecies about Elijah and the Messiah say? (In the coming chapters we will consider how to find the information that will enable us to answer these questions, so I won't cover that yet.)

One thoughtful, well-articulated question leads us further down the path on our treasure hunt through the Scriptures than a handful of vague and imprecise questions. If we take the time to ponder a troubling phrase, sentence or passage long enough for the problem to become clear in our mind we can unlock the meaning of the text. Let me offer another example from a few verses further in Mark's Gospel.

[Mark 1:14-15](#) is an important transition between Jesus' temptation in the wilderness and his public ministry. We might ask, "Why does Jesus say, 'The kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news'?" This is a fine question on a basic level. In fact, "Why?" questions make up a large percentage of the questions we ask in Bible study. But our basic "Why?" questions can be made more helpful if we ponder the text a little more. Rather than asking "Why does Jesus say this?" we could ask "Why would 'repent and believe in the gospel' be the appropriate response to the kingdom of God being at hand?" In doing the work of honing our question, we have had to notice that Jesus' proclamation is made of two parts: an announcement and a command. The question is stronger because we are considering the causal relationship between parts of Jesus' statement. When we ask about the response Jesus asks for, we are much better situated to explore what his proclamation of the kingdom of God connotes and implies.

Notice that the examples of good questions we have considered are open-ended, meaning that the answers will be beyond a simple "yes" or "no." Questions that can be answered with a simple affirmative or negative bring our thinking to a halt rather than pushing us further. Good questions press us deeper into the text. For example, if I asked, "Is John the messenger prophesied by Isaiah?" ([Mark 1:2](#)), the answer "yes" doesn't unlock more of the text. But if I turn it into an open-ended question (such as "Why does Mark begin the Gospel with this quote from Isaiah?"), there are five or six reasons that can be drawn from the passage.

Another characteristic of good questions in Bible study are ones that are relevant to the story or line of reasoning. Irrelevant questions are tangential rather than central to a passage. You can tell if a question is a tangent if thinking about it takes you away from the text rather than into it. For example, in your curiosity about John's diet, you might wonder, "What do locusts taste like?" or "How long could a man survive eating only locusts and honey?" To satisfy your curiosity, you could read about cultures that eat locusts by doing a quick Google search or listen to someone in your small group share about a wilderness survival show on the Discovery Channel. However, answering those questions won't actually help you dig further into [Mark 1](#). When a tangential question is asked in a small group, it's best to chuckle together, name it as a tangent and move on to a more relevant question.

So effective students of the Bible open the flood gates of their curiosity, but then they direct their exploration through honing their questions. They clarify the tension and make sure their questions are open-ended and relevant. This might seem like a lot of work, but putting the effort in at this point of the study will pay off later.

The process of turning so-so questions into really good ones can be done when studying by yourself when you go back to your first set of questions and rewrite them as needed. It can also be done communally. This can be a lot of fun as someone throws out an initial question and then the group hones it together. The process of sharpening your questions will begin to bring understanding of the text, even before you attempt to answer them.

### **Broaden Out**

In addition to well-honed questions, Bible study is aided by having a sufficient *range* of questions. In a woodworking shop, different tools accomplish different tasks. The same is true of questions in Bible study. Developing our skills in Bible study includes learning to use a broader selection of tools. Questions about a passage of the Bible can be sorted into four different categories, as seen in table 9.1.

**Table 9.1. Question Types in Bible Study**

Question Type	Goal	Description
Type 1	To SEE the text more fully	Questions that help us to envision the scene.
Type 2	To RELATE the text to our lives	Questions that make a connection between ourselves and the characters.
Type 3	To UNDERSTAND a part of the text	Questions that explore the tension or points of intrigue in the text.
Type 4	To UNDERSTAND the text as a whole	Questions that reveal how different sections of the text relate to each other.

People are often more drawn to one of the types than another. Consider a hypothetical small group Bible study whose members are named Joe, Amber, Clint and Joan. The first question out of Joe's mouth always begins with "Why?" Joe asks things like, "Why is Jesus so harsh toward the

Pharisees?” or “Why does Jesus answer the man’s question with a question?” Joe’s “Why” questions are type three questions.

Amber, on the other hand, asks type one questions. She wants to know, “Who are the Herodians?” or “At Jesus’ baptism, could the crowd hear the voice from heaven, or only Jesus?”

Clint is most interested in the implications of a passage for our lives. He is eager to ask type two questions, like “Does Jesus really expect us to turn the other cheek?” or “Does this passage mean that I will receive anything I pray for?”

Joan likes to step back and ask broader questions like, “Why would the author put these two stories next to each other?” or “How is Mary’s experience with the angel different than Zechariah’s?” Joan’s questions are type four questions.

All four types of questions are needed in inductive Bible study, but we don’t always ask all four types unless we are being intentional about it. Part of the benefit and blessing of studying the Bible in community is that a group is more likely to cover a broad range of questions and thus explore a passage more thoroughly. However, individuals can have extensive personal study if they pay attention to the type of questions they are asking and press themselves to ask all four types of questions every time they sit down to do inductive Bible study.

Notice the quality and the range of questions in the manuscript of [Luke 19:1-10](#) as shown in figure 9.1. I have written them near to the part of the text they refer to and have included a number to indicate their type.

Growing in Bible study involves learning to ask honed questions of the text and becoming more thorough in our question asking. Just as a competitive tennis player needs to develop their backhand swing as well as their forehand, it is invaluable to develop your question asking skills. As you formulate questions, your curiosity will grow and the process of discovery will be all the more rewarding. As noted by social psychologist Robert Cialdini, “The *Aha!* experience is much more satisfying when it is preceded by the *Huh?* experience.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* (New York: Random House, 2007), p. 81.

Luke 19:1-10

② What kind of person is equivalent to Z today?

③ Why does Z. want to see Jesus?

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When

① Why does Luke tell us Z is short?

5 Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come

④ How did Jesus know Z's name?

③ Why must he stay at Z's house?

down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to

welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest

of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my

⑤ If I have stolen something do I need to pay back 4x?

possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I

10 will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to

⑦ How has salvation come to this house?

this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out

and to save the lost."

③ Why add "too" to the statement?

⑦ Who is doing the seeking here?

③ What does it mean to be lost?

④ How will Z's life change because of this encounter with Jesus?

④ How does the repetition of sight terms connect to the story of blind beggar?

Figure 9.1.