

How to Read Discourse

~~Well good morning, it's great to be with you guys this morning. If you have a bible, turn to Matthew 7. We'll get there here in just a bit. If you are joining us for the first time this morning, we are on the final week of a teaching series all about the bible. And here at the end of the series, we've been getting really practical with how to *read* and *study* the bible on our own. Each week has been part teaching and part *lab* on how to read and study the Scriptures.~~

~~And the reality is that the bible is a complex book to read because it has a lot of different *types* of writing in it—it's made up of different *genres*. So **just like you read a novel differently than you read historical non-fiction, and you would read a memoir differently than you read an encyclopedia, you have to read the different types of literature in the bible differently from one another.** So what we've done in this series is we've broken the bible down into its three major types of literature. And each week for the last three weeks, we've taken *one* of those genres, and talked about how to read it.~~

~~Two weeks ago, we talked about how to read *narrative*: the parts of the bible that simply describe historical events for us. Last week, we talked about how to read *poetry*: these artistic expressions of writing in the bible that are designed to pull us into an *experience*. And so *today*, we're going to close things out by looking at how to read what is commonly called *discourse*. Another term for discourse would be *teaching*: the parts of the bible that communicate instruction or ideas to us directly.~~

Now, while discourse only makes up about one fourth of the bible, it is in that one fourth of the bible that we get some of the most direct instruction on what we should do and how we should live as the people of God. So it's a very *important* fourth of the Bible. Discourse in the bible would include things like the teachings of Jesus found in the gospels, and the New Testament letters like Ephesians, 1 & 2 Peter, Hebrews, and 1-3 John. But it also would include the laws and regulations in the Old Testament like we find in Leviticus and Numbers. It would include any parts of the prophetic books where God is teaching or correcting his people through the prophets. Basically, **if a passage is telling us what to do, what not to do, or explaining concepts to its audience, it is considered *discourse*.**

So if either of the past two weeks about how to read narrative and poetry have felt a little complex to you, I have good news: *discourse* is *generally* way more straightforward. In some ways, we actually saved the easiest for last (or at least the *simplest* for last).

Because discourse doesn't usually ask you to read between the lines or interpret any flowery language: **it simply asks you to hear what is being said, process it, and then do something with it.** We actually heard that in the passage that was read for us a few minutes ago: James says that we aren't to be just *hearers* of the word, but also *doers* of the word. So **the biggest challenge when reading discourse is to make sure we actually *put into practice* the things we read and learn.** But we'll circle back around to all that at the end.

For now, just like we've done the past two weeks, let's kick things off with a list of questions to use when we read discourse in the bible. We'll list them out quickly, and then circle back around and figure out how they work by using them to work through a few passages in the bible. Here are the questions to ask of *discourse*:

- **What is the *main point* of the passage? So generally speaking, a passage only has *one* main point.** There may be multiple *implications* we can draw out of that one point, multiple *observations* we can make about a passage. But generally there is just one big idea. So whenever you read a passage, it helps to be able to summarize that main point in your own words.
- **What is the *context* of the passage?** As we mentioned in week 2 of this series, the bible as a whole is a *story*. So **to understand what it's saying, we need to read each passage with an eye to the part of the story we're in.** Another way of putting that is that we need to understand its *context*. What part of the story are we in? Who is this being said *to*? What's the *purpose* of what's being said? All of that is important to understanding the passage itself.
- **Are there any *cultural differences* between the author's context and ours that might be relevant?** Following up on the last question, are there any differences that need to be taken into account? We've got to remember, between us and even the most recent writings in the bible are about 1900 years of history, and thousands upon thousands of miles. So understandably, there are sometimes going to be some differences between our two contexts that need to be noticed. **To understand what a passage is saying to *us*, we need to first make sure we understand what it was saying to its original audience.** Now, *sometimes*, the answer to this one is going to be a simple "no." No there really *aren't* any differences that substantially change the meaning of the text. For instance, "do not commit adultery" means exactly the same thing to us that it meant to the people in the book of Exodus. "Forgive one another as God in Christ forgave you," the command Paul writes to the Ephesian church, means pretty much the exact same thing to us that it meant to the Ephesians that it was written to. So sometimes the

answer is “no.” But other times, the answer is “yes.” One example would be the passages in the New Testament that talk about how we should “greet one another with a holy kiss.” If I go up to Jeff, one of our other pastors, and greet him with a kiss every time I see him, that communicates something very *different culturally* than it would to the audience the New Testament was written to. Because there are some substantial *cultural differences* between their day and ours. So we want to ask the question, *are there any cultural differences to keep in mind* as we read this passage? Next...

- **In light of what the author was saying to his *audience*, what is God saying to *us*?** Once we understand what the passage meant to its original audience, we can start to bring it into *our* context: how do we take the principles and ideas and instructions that we read, and *apply* them in *our* day and age?
- **How does Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection *empower* or *enable* us to put this into practice?** Lastly, as we’ve mentioned already in this series, discourse has two goals: 1) to point us to Jesus (just like all of the bible does), and 2) for us to put what it teaches into *practice*. So the last thing we ask is how Jesus’ life, death and resurrection contributes to the ideas being communicated. How does the gospel *enable* or *motivate* us to put into *practice*, the ideas being discussed?

Do all of those make sense, at least in theory? Alright, let’s use them to work through a couple passages of discourse in the bible. Let’s start with a rather well-known one in the New Testament. Let’s look at Matthew 7.

Matthew 7:1-5

So this is the famous “do not judge” passage in the bible. As a pastor, I’ve learned that there are two verses in the bible that nearly every person in America has memorized: one is John 11:35—anybody know what that one is? (Welp, so apparently I’m wrong—not everybody has it memorized. Or at least doesn’t have the verse number memorized.) John 11:35 is “*Jesus wept.*” But the other one that people know, whether they are Christians or not, is this one: they know “that the bible says not to judge.” But I don’t know that everybody quite *understands* what it does and doesn’t *mean*. So let’s take a look at it together. Matthew 7, starting in v. 1:

[1] “Judge not, that you be not judged. [2] For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. [3] Why do you see the **speck** that is in your **brother’s eye**, but do **not** notice the **log** that is in **your own eye**? [4] Or how can you **say** to your brother, ‘Let me take the

speck out of your eye,' when there is the **log** in your own eye? [5] **You hypocrite,** first take the **log** out of your own eye, and then you will see **clearly** to take the **speck** out of your brother's eye.

So there we have it. Now let's use our questions to work our way through it and try to figure out what it (truly) means.

What is the main point of the passage?

Well, at risk of being overly simplistic, the point is "do not judge." But to elaborate just a little bit more, it seems that the point is that we should examine our own sin with as much scrutiny as we examine other people's. That would be one way of summarizing the verses we just read. Next...

What is the context of the passage?

Well, the context of this passage is Jesus' so-called "sermon on the mount." It's sort of this manifesto that he gives to his early disciples about how they should and shouldn't live. And as part of that, he wants them to guard against this hyper-judgmental, others-critical posture that could be present in themselves.

But additionally, I think it's helpful to look at some of the passages *around* this one. Specifically, one of the passages after it. So just eight verses later, Jesus is going to say that we should "beware of false prophets," and that we will "recognize false prophets by their fruit." So here, potentially *moments* after he says "do not judge," he is actually urging his followers to make a "judgment" about false prophets. So whatever Jesus means by "do not judge," it *can't* just be a blanket statement. It can't mean "don't ever make moral assessments of other people in any way." Because apparently there *are* situations where we *absolutely should* do that. So whatever we decide verses 1-5 mean, it has to jive with that. We can't interpret *some* of Jesus' teaching in a way that means he violates his own teaching. So with that in mind, let's keep moving...

Are there any cultural differences between the author's context and ours that might be relevant?

So this is probably one example of a time where the answer to this question is more or less "no." There aren't any *significant* differences between Jesus' context and ours that have a major impact on what this passage means. So we can move on...

In light of what the author was saying to his audience, what is God saying to us?

Well, I think what the passage saying to us is that we shouldn't be hyper-focused on the faults of others, to the exclusion of dealing with our own faults. That on one hand, we shouldn't be *afraid* to name the faults of others, but that we should do that only after dealing with our own faults and sins and shortcomings, so that we can see more *clearly* to help that other person. I think it tells us that our *own* sin, when left undealt with, can have a *blinding effect* on us. Jesus draws out this whole illustration about the log and the speck as a way of communicating that. So we should be sure to address our own sin with the same intensity, and *more* urgency, than we use address the sins of others. And lastly...

How does Jesus' life, death, and resurrection empower or enable us to put this into practice?

Well for one, the more you endeavor to deal with your own sin, the more you will find that that is nearly impossible outside of Jesus. If you do not understand who you are in and through Jesus, dealing with your own sin will either feel *undesirable* (meaning, you won't the *desire* to do it, because that will require admitting that you are somehow inadequate or insufficient in and of yourself), or it will feel too *overwhelming* (you will be so intimidated by the sheer *volume* of sin in your own heart that you will feel crippled and defeated *by* it). That's what will happen if you sincerely endeavor to deal with your own sin *without* Jesus.

But once you *understand* that Jesus has come to *deal* with your sin—to pay the penalty for it and then *set you free* from it—the whole process becomes entirely more possible than it was before. Once you realize that in Jesus, you are not defined by *your sin* but rather by his *resurrection life*—your sin no longer has the same power over you. You can *admit* and *own up to* your sin, **because your sin does not have the final word on who you are**. Which makes dealing with your sin entirely more possible.

So that enables us first *examine ourselves*. We ask ourselves “is there anything off in me that might make me more bothered by their sin than I should be?” We should ask, “is this actually a sin they need to be engaged on, or is it just something they're doing that I don't like?” “And if it is actually sin, have I spent just as much time and effort searching my own heart for sin as I have searching *their* life for sin?” And once we've done that, and we've *confessed* that to God and to others, considered how the blood of Jesus stands in *my place* for *my sin*, I can now “see clearly” to engage this other person on *their* sin. And chances are, that whole process is going to make me a lot more helpful and compassionate towards them than I would've been otherwise.

That's how the good news of Jesus empowers and enables us to put this into practice. Does that make sense? Did you follow most of how we did that? Love it. Alright, let's do another one. This time let's hop over to the *Old Testament*. Let's go to Genesis 17.

Genesis 17:9-14

What we're about to read in *this* passage is a bit of discourse spoken *by* God, *to* a man named Abraham. God is explaining a new ritual that he wants Abraham to participate in. And that ritual *is...circumcision*. So this is about to get *interesting*. Stay with me. So up until this point in the story, God has promised Abraham, who at this point is just named *Abram*, that he is going to give Abram a really big family. Lots and lots of descendants. Which was a big deal in the ancient world in general. But it was *even more* of a big deal *to Abram*, because he and his wife were "advanced in years," and up until this point had not been able to have any kids at all. So after giving that initial promise for a big family to Abram, God says *this*, beginning in v. 9:

*[9] And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you **and your offspring after you throughout their generations**. [10] **This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.** [11] You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins [just in case there was any confusion, as to what exactly God meant by that term "circumcision." It should now be abundantly clear to Abram what God means.], and [v. 11] **it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.** [12] **He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations** ["how many of them, God?" "Every one of them," God says], *whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring,* [13] **both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised.** So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. [14] **Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.**" [God really does not want Abram to miss the *comprehensive* nature of this particular command]*

How's everybody doing? Uncomfortable? Cringing a little bit? I hope that somebody in this room is going to grab lunch with their parents and/or grandparents after this, and I sincerely hope that the first question they ask you is "what was the sermon about today?" Some of you are going to be like "Matthew 7! We only talked about Matthew 7 and absolutely nothing else!"

So let's be honest, this is probably a weird passage for a lot of us. But there are *a lot of passages like this* in the bible, and specifically in the Old Testament. Passages where God is very clearly giving his people instructions, but where we are reading it *today* and going "I don't *think* this is telling me that *I* have to do this?" Or at least, "I really *hope* this isn't telling me that *I* have to do this?!" But sometimes it's difficult to know exactly *why* we conclude that. So let's get to work and see if we can get some clarity on it all. First question...

What is the main point of the passage?

The answer to *this* question is actually unbelievably easy for this passage, mainly because God basically just says the same exact thing three or four different ways in the passage. We might sum it up like this: God wants Abram's family to keep a sign of their covenant with him by having every male in the family circumcised. Like...*every* male. He's very sure of it. There's our main point. Question #2...

What is the context of the passage?

For this one, we might say that God is reiterating, confirming, and emphasizing the importance of his covenant with Abram. He initially makes the promise to Abram in Genesis 12, and repeats it a couple more times. But things are about to start moving a lot faster in regards to the promise. And so here, in a way, God wants Abram to know that he means business, and wants to know that Abram is ready for what is about to happen. Further, this is God rolling out his plan to bless "all the nations of the earth." This is God's strategy for making himself known to the world, through this man Abram's family.

Are there any cultural differences between the author's context and ours that might be relevant?

Uh, this one is *massively* important for this passage (and the stakes are high, right?). Let me go ahead and say emphatically, *yes*—there are differences between the author's context and ours. For one, Abram finds himself in a scenario where God continuing *his* family line is *the plan* for God blessing the world (~~see Genesis 12:13~~). That's a little different than our context, isn't it? I don't know that God's plan to reveal himself to the world is dependent upon any of us in this room having children. So that's one very important distinction.

Another one might be that circumcision was to be *the distinguishing factor* between God's people, and those who *weren't* God's people. Like, that was it. That was the ritual

given to God's people to set themselves apart from the world around them. But that being said, if you know your *New Testament*, we're actually told in a *few* places that God's people *now* distinguish themselves in a new, slightly less *painful* way. Look with me on the screen, for instance, at Colossians 2:11-12:

*In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision [or, a type of circumcision] **not** performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was **put off** when you were circumcised by Christ, **having been buried with him in baptism**, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.*

Okay. So apparently, at least in *some way*, *baptism* is now meant to *take over* aspects of what *circumcision* represented in the *Old Testament*. **Baptism is now meant to be the sign of God and his covenant, or relationship with us, instead of circumcision.** Now, Christians definitely differ when it comes to all the exact implications of that, but there's little disagreement about the fact that baptism is now the sign, rather than circumcision. So, building from all *that*, next question...

In light of what the author was saying to his audience, what is God saying to us?

Well, in light of what we just heard about *baptism*, it would seem that just like *circumcision* was a sign between God and his people, *baptism* is *now* the sign between God and his people. God still very much desires there to be an external symbol of his relationship—his “*covenant*”—with us. **It's just that now it's a different symbol.**

And so just like God was...we'll just call it *persistent*...about the importance of *circumcision*—he is also persistent about the importance of *baptism* today. He still desires that followers of Jesus participate in this sign as a representation of his relationship with them. Such that in his parting instructions to his disciples before leaving earth, he *emphasizes* baptism. He says, “go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing them* in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit...” So in Jesus' mind, there is a one-to-one correlation: **if they're a disciple, they get baptized. Just like in Abram's day, there was a one-to-one between those who belonged to the line of Abram and those who were circumcised.** So, though this passage doesn't insist on the necessity of *circumcision* to us, it does communicate the importance of *baptism*. Does that make sense? Okay, last question:

How does Jesus' life, death, and resurrection empower or enable us to put this into practice?

Well, when it comes to *baptism*, what we are actually *demonstrating when we are baptized* is the death and resurrection of Jesus. 1 Peter, which we're actually going to begin studying next week together—actually says that it is *through the resurrection* of Jesus that we are baptized. Meaning that when we go down under the water, we are demonstrating that the old version of us “died” along with Jesus on the cross, and when we come up out of the water, we are demonstrating that the new us “resurrected” when Jesus came out of the grave. So seen correctly, baptism is actually all about *representing* what Jesus accomplished through his life, death and resurrection. It's all about putting on display what he made possible. So another one would be that what baptism symbolizes (cleansing from sin), Jesus' life, death and resurrection makes possible.

//

So there we have a couple examples of how to work through discourse in the bible. And with both of those, as you can see, there are very direct ways to put those passages “into practice.” Because, remember: **the goal is never that we would just *know more things* as a result of reading these types of passages. The goal is always that we would *do something* with what we know.** That we would “put them into practice.” That we would be not just *hearers* of the word, but *doers*.

//

So...in many ways, we are *ending* this series on the bible just like how we *started* it. The very first week, we talked about how **one of the biggest factors in how we change as human beings are the *habits* we participate in.** One of the most important questions you will answer as a follower of Jesus is not just “what do you know about God?” but rather “what are you *doing* with what you know?”

And so as we wrap up this morning, let me just ask those of us in the room who are followers of Jesus that question: “what are you *doing* with what you know?” Think back to the last passage you read in the bible that would be considered discourse. What did you *do* with it? If it was about who God is and what he's like, did you allow that to shape and inform how you interact with him? If it was about loving people, selflessly giving up your preferences to benefit those God has put around you, did you do that? If it was about repenting of your sin, forsaking anything that would be a barrier to relationship with Jesus, did you *do* that? If it was about loving your enemies, *praying* for those who make life harder for you, did you *do* it?

You see, here at City Church, we want to be a group of people that not only *believe* right things, but people who *practice* right things. A really simple example is our two minute meet-and-greet time towards the beginning of the service. Every single week, one of us

gets up here and says a version of the exact same thing we said last week: “hey, church isn’t an event, it’s not a building—it’s a family. It’s a group of people we’re called to belong to.” And then we invite you to do the most awkward thing ever—which is turn around to the many people around you that you may or may not know, and talk to them.

Now, we don’t *have* to do that. We could just stand up, give our little spiel about the church being a family, and then move on to the next part of the service. And honestly, a lot of you might show up more often if we just did *that*, because it would be a lot less awkward. But we want to be a group of people that actually *practice* the church being a family—not just a group of people who *know* the Church is a family. We want to get that understanding of the church, not just into your head, but into your limbic system. We want you to become *doers* of the word, and not just *hearers*. And here’s what we know: if you won’t turn around and talk to the people around you for two short minutes, there’s not much of a shot you’re going to live life with difficult people throughout the week. So we take an awkward two minutes as an opportunity to put that belief into *practice*.

So for you, what beliefs are you *putting into practice* this week? What are you doing with what you know? And how might Jesus’ life, death and resurrection enable you to put all of it into practice, more and more, as you encounter all that the Scriptures have to say? Because with the entirety of the Scriptures—not just discourse, but *all* of it—what we’re after is building our life upon the things we read. We want to read them, digest them, and then put them into practice. As we mentioned the very first week of the series, that is where personal transformation comes from: from us choosing to, day by day, in small ways and big ways, put the teachings of Jesus into practice. And through that process, allow the Holy Spirit to form us into certain types of people.

Let’s pray together.