

Begin by Learning to See!

The first skill you need to develop is to train your mind to *see* when you read a passage—to observe carefully the words, to be on the alert for the details. Too many of us are in the habit of reading Scripture without seeing very much, without thinking about the words we are seeing. We read words, but we do not observe what the words are saying. Sometimes we do not even see all the words in a passage. We are lazy observers! Because of inaccurate and careless observations, we often make faulty interpretations and shallow applications.

Meaning and Purpose of Observation

Observation can be defined in several ways: the act, power, or habit of seeing and noting; thorough and careful notice; to watch closely; to look intently; to give full attention to what one sees; to be mentally aware of what one sees. One person described observation as “the art of seeing things as they are, impartially, intensely, fearlessly.”

Observation demands concentration!

The purpose of observation is to saturate yourself thoroughly with the content of a passage. Like a sponge you should absorb everything that is before you. You need to learn to be exact and accurate in your observations. Not everything you read will be of equal value; therefore, in the process you also have to learn to discern what is noteworthy and what is not. All of these procedures require concentration.

Ways to Observe

One reason we do not “see” very much when we read is that we do not know what to look for. Most of us need “handles” or “clues,” help in knowing what specific things to look for. Once we learn what are some of the specific things to observe, we will begin to discover things in our reading that we never saw before.

Learning to observe details is a skill which will take time and practice. On the next two pages are charts containing lists of the kinds of things to look for when reading a passage. This list is a quick overview. In the following chapters, they will be described in greater detail. This list will have little meaning to you until you become involved in looking for some of these clues to discovering what an author is saying.

Observations Overwhelming?

As you study the lists on the following pages, the specific things for which to look when trying to develop your powers of observation, you may feel overwhelmed. Possibly you are asking yourself, "How can I be alert for all of these things? There are too many things to look for at one time!"

We have listed many things in order to acquaint you with the variety of things for which to be alert, but learning to observe is like any other skill. You will learn it a step at a time.

One of the most difficult problems in helping persons to develop their powers of observation is to get them to believe that it has value. Some persons feel that it is a waste of time. They feel that application is the most important aspect of Bible study. They want to read a passage quickly and then spend their time concentrating on how to apply the message. Others just want to focus on interpretation, trying to find out what the commentaries have to say about a passage.

Learning the skills in observation can be a rather frustrating process. Careful observation requires concentrated thinking, and few of us really want to learn how to think! Someone has said that five percent of the people *think*. Fifteen percent of the people *think they think*. Eighty percent of the people would rather *die than think*. This may be an unfair judgment, but I challenge you to remember these words when you become frustrated in learning how to develop your powers of observation.

Practice Skills

To learn the skills of observation takes practice. While we listed many things, you will practice only a few at a time. Gradually as you practice, you will find observing details to become second nature. On pages 20-24 are some Discovery Skills for you to practice. Don't just read the suggestions. Actually do them, one practice skill at a time. You will soon find how quickly your power of observation increases as you follow the suggestions.

Specific Things to Observe

<p>Key Words</p>	<p>When you first read a passage, look for the key words, those words which you think are important in the passage. Repetition of words will sometimes give you a clue. Underline them in your Bible.</p>
<p>Advice admonitions warnings promises</p>	<p>Be on the alert for the admonitions which a writer gives: the advice, the exhortations, the warnings, the things which he tells you to do. Also note the promises and the encouragements. One clue is to look for imperative verbs.</p>
<p>Reasons Results for doing things</p>	<p>When you observe admonitions, see if the writer gives you some reasons for his advice. Or note if he sets forth a <i>cause-and-effect</i> relationship — <i>if you do this, then this will happen</i>. Often with a warning, he will give possible results.</p>
<p>contrasts comparisons illustrations</p>	<p>Make special note of the way a writer uses contrasts, comparisons, illustrations to bring out his ideas. Comparison is the association of things that are similar. Contrast is the association of things that are opposite, often introduced with “but.”</p>
<p>Repetition and progression of ideas</p>	<p>Be on the alert for repetition of words, ideas, statements. This will often give you a clue as to the author’s purpose in a passage.</p> <p>Take special note of lists of items or ideas. Compare the items and see if there is any significance in the order. Do ideas progress toward a climax?</p>
<p>Questions</p>	<p>Be on the watch for the use of the question. Is it used to introduce an idea, summarize a series of ideas, or just to challenge the thinking?</p>

Specific Things to Observe

<p>Important connectives</p> <p>prepositions conjunctions</p>	<p>Connectives are very important in revealing key ideas and relationships. Be on the alert for some of the following:</p> <p><i>but</i>—introduces a contrast <i>if</i>—introduces conditional clause <i>for, because, therefore</i>—introduce reason and results <i>in, into, with</i>—important connectives <i>in order that</i>—sets forth a purpose</p>
<p>Grammatical construction</p> <p>verbs nouns pronouns adverbs adjectives</p>	<p>The term “grammar” no doubt frightens you, but even so, it is important to note the grammatical construction of some statements. Be on the alert for the verbs and their tenses—for the use of pronouns—for the use of adverbs and adjectives and the way they describe things.</p>
<p>Atmosphere</p> <p>Emphatic statements</p>	<p>Note the general tone of a passage. It may be characterized by the mood of joy, thanksgiving, concern, humility, zeal, anger, caution. The tone of a passage may vary as a writer moves from one idea to another. The mood of a writer is often revealed by the way he addresses his readers.</p> <p>Also note the use he makes of emphatic statements, words and phrases to reveal his feelings.</p>
<p>Literary form</p>	<p>Always note the literary form of a passage—discourse, narrative, poetic, dramatic, parabolic, apocalyptic. Also determine if the writer is using literal or figurative terms.</p>
<p>General structure</p>	<p>Note the arrangement of the ideas in a passage, the relationship of verses to each other. Sometimes the author makes a general statement, then explains it with examples. Other times he may list a series of ideas and then summarize with a general statement.</p>

Practice A – Be on Alert for Details

1. Look for key words

No matter what you are reading, the first step is always to be on the alert for the key words, those words which seem to you to be important words to the message. This is one of the easier processes in observation, but also is one of the most important. Whether you are reading the Bible, a book, a magazine, or a newspaper, you have to begin by observing the *words* and decide which seem to be the most important for understanding the main thrust of the passage.

On page 21 is a “structural diagram” of Matthew 6:25-34. This is the passage you are to use for your first practice. Note the way the units of thought are arranged so that it is easier to see what is in the passage. As you study this passage, make your observations directly on the printed passage.

a) **UNDERLINE THE KEY WORDS.** As you begin to read Matthew 6:25-34, using a colored pencil, underline what you consider some of the key words. One of the clues is to note the words which are repeated. Do not be afraid to underline anything you feel is important. There is no right or wrong when underlining what you consider important words. Underline as many as you feel like underlining. Be sure you do this step before you begin the next step.

b) **SELECT THE MOST IMPORTANT WORDS.** In the process you may have underlined many words, or just a few, because you were not sure just how to select key words. If you have underlined many, your next task is to determine which of the many are *the* key words. Not all of the words which you may have underlined have equal value. Review those which you have underlined and select about four which you feel are most significant in terms of the message in the passage. Circle these words.

2. Look for other details

Looking for key words has given you some insight into the passage, but this is just a beginning. To gain more insight, here are some other things to do. If you are several in your small study group, divide the verses among you: 6:25-27; 28-30; 31-34. Record in the left margin of the passage other things you observe.

- a) admonitions and reasons
- b) use of questions
- c) contrasts, comparisons, illustrations
- d) key connectives (*circle these*)
- f) repetition of ideas
- g) emphatic statements

Matthew 6:25-34

25. "Therefore I tell you,
do not be anxious about your life,
what you shall eat or
what you shall drink,
nor about your body,
what you shall put on.

Is not life more than food,
and the body more than clothing?
26. Look at the birds of the air:
they neither sow nor reap
nor gather into barns,
and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

Are you not of more value than they?
27. And which of you by being anxious
can add one cubit to his span of life?
28. And why are you anxious about clothing?
Consider the lilies of the field,
how they grow;
they neither toil nor spin;
29. yet I tell you,
even Solomon in all his glory
was not arrayed like one of these.
30. But if God so clothes the grass of the field,
which today is alive
and tomorrow is thrown into the oven,
will he not much more clothe you,
O men of little faith?
31. Therefore, do not be anxious, saying,
'What shall we eat?'
or 'What shall we drink?'
or 'What shall we wear?'
32. For the Gentiles seek all these things;
and your heavenly Father knows
that you need them all.
33. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness,
and all these things
shall be yours as well.
34. Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow,
for tomorrow will be anxious for itself.
Let the day's own trouble
be sufficient for the day."

Example

Observations	Scripture Passage
Important connective — <i>therefore</i> emphatic statement— <i>I tell you</i> Admonition — <i>do not be anxious</i> key words— <i>anxious—life</i> two illustrations— <i>eat—drink</i> <i>body</i> —second thing not to be anxious about Note use of question. Note repetition of words: <i>life, body, more</i>	25. “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and body more than clothing?”

This is an example of how you might record observations on the printed Bible passage. You might not have room to put down all that I have included. You might record the observation and draw a line to the word or group of words about which you are making the observation.

3. Look for general structure

Remember that one of the things to observe is the general structure of a passage—the relationship of the verses to each other. Again study this passage and bracket those verses which seem to focus on the same topic. If you have not done much analyzation of structure, I will give you one way to bracket the verses: 6:25; 26-27; 28-30; 31-34. Then summarize the main idea in each set of verses in brief phrases.

This passage is an example of progression on ideas. Determine which verse is the climax of the passage.

▶ Practice B — Seek to Know Meanings

1. Begin by asking yourself questions

You have been involved in several experiences to help you develop your powers of observation. You have just begun to develop them. This is a process which takes time and practice. But even in the little practice you have had, you may have become aware of another process which has been developing. Possibly you have been asking yourself some questions, such as: “I wonder why Jesus said the things he did? I wonder what he meant by what he said?” Asking yourself questions is a very important step in Bible study—in any kind of study. It is the bridge between observation and interpretation. These questions might be called, “I wonder questions” or “questions for understanding.”

Maybe you are saying, “But what kind of questions do I ask? I have never thought much about asking myself questions.” Learning to ask ourselves questions about what we read is a skill just like learning

how to observe. At first most persons do not know how to ask themselves questions. In Chapter 6 we shall focus more intently on the process of asking questions, but in this practice we shall list some of the kinds you can ask yourself:

- Why did Jesus say . . . ?
- What is the meaning of . . . ?
- What is the significance of . . . ?
- What is the implication of . . . ?
- What is the relationship between . . . ?

Since you may not have had much practice in asking questions, I shall list some of the kinds you might ask yourself in terms of the passage. Begin by asking questions about key words, even though you think you know their meaning.

Example

Scripture Passage	Questions for Understanding
<p>25. "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?"</p>	<p>Why the emphatic words, <i>I tell you</i>? Meaning of <i>anxious</i>? Meaning of <i>life</i>? Significance of these illustrations? Meaning of <i>body</i>? Significance of this illustration? Significance of this question? Symbolic meaning of <i>food</i> and <i>clothing</i>?</p>

These are samples of the kinds of questions you might ask yourself. If you focused on only a few of the verses in the process of observation, focus on the same verses and record some of the questions you might ask yourself about the observations you made.

2. Answering questions

The asking of questions has several purposes: to stimulate your thinking and to begin to identify those words, phrases, and statements which need interpretation. Maybe you thought such words as, *anxious, body, life*, were words you already knew and did not need interpretation. But when you begin to ask yourself questions about them, you realize that you need to interpret them in order to understand the passage.

In Chapter 6 we shall discuss more thoroughly the ways to interpret a passage, but in this chapter we suggest only a few of the ways. If you are working with a small group, again divide your task. Each person could work on one section of the verses for interpretation. Try to answer some of the questions by doing these things:

- a) **DEFINE WORDS:** Look in a dictionary to discover what is the

meaning of some of the key words such as: *anxious, life, body, kingdom, righteousness.*

b) **COMPARE TRANSLATIONS:** Read the passage in several translations to discover what other words are used in translating the passage.

c) **STUDY CROSS-REFERENCES:** Look up some of these cross-references for additional insight into meanings: Luke 12:22-31; Romans 14:17; Phil. 4:4-7.

d) **WRESTLE WITH MEANINGS:** This last suggestion is a very important part in Bible study. It is possible to define words, compare translations, study cross-references, and still not really get at the core of the meaning of a passage. You also have to wrestle, think, meditate, integrate what you have been learning, and draw conclusions.

e) **SUMMARIZE FINDINGS:** Try to formulate the insights gained through your study in some summary statements: Jesus seems to be saying in this verse or group of verses these things . . .

► Practice C – Personalize Biblical Teachings

This is a passage which speaks to the basic needs of life. All of us are plagued with anxieties about “food” and “clothing”—the very necessities of life. Jesus seems to be focusing on priorities, that which we are to place first in our lives. If we give him the proper place in our lives, we can trust him to take care of all our *needs*—although he may not supply all our *wants*.

Evaluation

As you have studied this passage, you need to ask yourself if what Jesus says has value for today. If we place Jesus first in our lives, will he really supply all our needs?

Application and Actualization

Select one of the following and consider how you might apply the challenge in this passage to your life:

1. Complete this statement: If I really took Jesus’ teaching in this passage seriously, the difference it would make in my life is . . .
2. Analyze your anxieties. Divide a sheet of paper in three parts:

List some things you are
anxious about right
now.

List some of the ways
you usually handle your
anxieties.

Following Jesus’ admo-
nitions, list some ways
that would be better
approaches.

3. Study the advertisements in papers. What do they say to us about priorities and anxieties?
4. Share and pray. Share with your teammates an anxiety which you now have and invite them to pray with you about it. Pray with them about theirs.