

CHAPTER 4

How to Increase Your Powers of Observation

You have just practiced the main procedures which are involved in any Bible study, steps which you need follow to discover the content and meaning of a passage. As you studied Matthew 6:25-34, you did these things:

Observed—by looking for key words, admonitions, questions, contrasts, comparisons, illustrations, connectives, etc.

Interpreted—by asking questions, comparing translations, defining words, studying cross-references, wrestling with meanings.

Summarized—by bracketing verses and summarizing key ideas.

Evaluated—by determining what value Jesus' words have for persons today.

Applied—by thinking of what these words were saying to you personally.

Actualized—only you know in what way you have been actualizing the admonitions in this passage.

Problems?

When you tried to follow some of these steps, did you have problems? If you did, you are normal! Learning skills takes practice. But I hope you did gain a deeper insight into this passage, even though it is a passage you may have read many times. Through some of these experiences, I hope that you were helped to become a discoverer, that you discovered some truths which you had not discovered before in your reading.

You have just begun to use some of the techniques which will increase your powers of observation. In Chapter 3 you were given a list of the many things for which you can look. A very brief description was given of each one. In order to broaden your understanding of these techniques we shall review the list and give a more detailed description of some of them. After you have studied the more detailed descriptions, you are to work on another passage for practicing.

1. Look for admonitions.

When you are reading a discourse passage, be on the alert for every time the writer tells you to *do something* or *not to do something* or *to be something*. These might be admonitions, warnings, exhortations, advice, commands, promises. The writer will be speaking directly to you, the reader. Or in the case of Jesus' admonitions, he will be speaking directly to his hearers. When you look for admonitions, note the imperative verbs, those which tell you to do something. These are often your key.

2. Look for logical relationships.

Whenever a writer gives *commands* or *advice* or *warnings*, he will often back them up with *reasons*, *purposes*, *proofs* or *results*. Also be on the alert for *cause-and-effect* relationships. Sometimes the writer will set forth a warning and then show the effects if the warning is not heeded. Or he may describe a condition and then give the reason for the condition. Connectives are often the key for noting logical relationships. Train yourself to observe these key connectives:

because or *for*: These words often introduce a reason or result.

in order that: This phrase often sets forth a purpose.

therefore: This word often introduces a summary of ideas, a result or condition.

if: This conjunction introduces a condition which requires action or sets forth a cause which will bring forth certain results. "*If this is true, then this will happen or this should happen.*"

3. Look for contrasts, comparisons, illustrations.

When a writer seeks to convey a new idea, he will often try to associate it with something that is already familiar to the reader. Make special note of the way a writer uses contrasts, comparisons, and illustrations to bring out his ideas. A comparison is the association of similar things. In grammar we speak of "similes" and "metaphors." An example of a simile is: "The tongue is *like* a fire." An example of a metaphor is: "The tongue *is* a fire."

A contrast is the association of opposites. We are told that our minds can recall contrasts better than we recall comparisons. The connective "but" often introduces a contrast.

4. Look for repetitions and progressions in thought.

In order to impress his readers and communicate his ideas, an author will often repeat words, phrases, ideas. These you will often discover as you look for key words.

Also make special note of lists of items. Authors have reasons for listing what they do and even for the order of a series. You should study the series to see if there is any significance in the order of the list or progression in thought. Compare the first and the last items in a series to see if there is any significant difference.

There can be progression in thought patterns as well as in a series of items. One idea can grow out of another. Note how the author arranges his material so that the ideas progress toward a climax. Does he build one idea on another until he presents his greatest challenge at the end of a paragraph or chapter?

5. Look for grammatical constructions.

The term grammar may frighten you, but it is important to make note of some grammatical constructions. Let us not forget that some of our Christian doctrines have been determined by the grammatical use of verb tenses, singular nouns, and little prepositions such as "in" and "through."

You do not have to identify every word in a passage in terms of its grammatical construction, but the following list reflects some of the areas for which to be alert:

- *Nouns and pronouns:* Especially be mindful of the personal pronouns.
- *Verbs and their tenses:* Verbs are often key to understanding a passage.
- *Adjectives and adverbs:* Note what they describe.
- *Key prepositions:* Note the significance of such words as *in, through, into, by, of.*
- *Important connectives:* Be mindful of the connectives which reflect results, reasons and conclusions, such as, *therefore, yet, however, likewise, nevertheless.*
- *Emphatic words:* Note words and phrases which the author uses to give emphasis to his thoughts such as, *truly, verily, behold, indeed, finally, especially, last of all, I tell you.*
- *Phrases and clauses:* Note what they describe. Note how some clauses are introduced with the words, *who, where, when, what, why, how.* These are also words which you might use as questions when you are observing a passage.

Don't be discouraged by this list. You will find that as you look for other things, you will begin to identify some of these grammatical constructions as well.

6. Look for use of questions.

Always be on the watch for the use of questions. An author may use a question to introduce an idea, or to challenge the thinking of the readers, or to summarize his ideas at the close. Sometimes he may use what is called a "rhetorical question." He does not expect an answer, but uses it just to stimulate the thinking of the reader and challenge him in his response.

7. Look for the general structure of passage.

Be mindful of the structure of a biblical passage, whether it is a paragraph, a chapter, or even a book. Structure can often reveal an author's purpose. When a person writes something, he usually has a definite purpose for what he says. Therefore, he will not only be concerned about the words he uses, but also about the way he arranges

his ideas. Sometimes he may arrange his ideas in a logical order, one idea growing out of the next. He reveals his concern for his intellectual impact. Other times he will arrange his ideas in a psychological order, revealing his concern for the emotional impact. Sometimes, Bible passages seem to have no apparent order in terms of structure. The ideas are more like beads on a string, or they tumble out in profusion like Paul's ideas in some of his epistles.

Always be on the alert for the relationship of verses and paragraphs to each other. Make note of those verses which seem to focus on the same ideas. Also note whether an author begins with a general statement and then explains it with specific examples, or if he begins with a series of ideas and then summarizes with a general statement.

8. Look for literary form and atmosphere.

Literary form is the type of writing an author uses to express his message. The major types which authors can use are found in biblical literature. As you study a passage, observe the following types:

Discourse—the kind of approach found in Jesus' sermons and employed in the epistles, in which ideas are presented in logical and argumentative form.

Prose narrative—found in the historical books and the Gospels, where historical events are often described in chronological order.

Poetry—the type found in the Psalms and Job.

Parable—brief stories used to bring out a specific truth, like the parables of Jesus.

Apocalyptic—characterized by symbolism and descriptions of visions, as in the book of Revelation and Daniel.

Also you need to discern whether the author is using *literal* or *figurative* terminology. A literal term is one that is to be considered according to its natural or usual meaning. A figurative term is symbolic in nature and must be interpreted accordingly. For instance, when Jesus said, "I am the living bread . . . if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever" (John 6:51), he was using figurative language. The Jews who heard him interpreted his words literally and asked, "How can the man give us his flesh to eat?" (John 6:52). So it is when you observe and interpret. Unless you observe and understand the nature of the terminology, you may be unfair to the author in your interpretations.

The general tone of a passage is also important to observe. It may be characterized by the mood of joy, thanksgiving, concern, humility, zeal, anger, despair. You can sense the feelings of an author, by the words he uses and the way he puts his words together.

Practice A – Observe the Details

1. Look for key words

On page 30 is a “structural diagram” of 1 Corinthians 13. This is the passage which you are to use for your practice this time. Make your observations directly on the printed page.

First, read the passage and underline what you consider to be some of the key words. It is not difficult to select *the* key word in this passage, but also select three or four others which you think are also keys to the message of the chapter. Remember that your selections might differ from those which others select.

2. Look for other details

Reread the passage and note the many literary techniques Paul used to convey his message. Note that Paul gives no admonitions in this passage, but he makes strong use of some other approaches. If there are several in your group, each of you might study just one section of verses.

a) CAUSE-AND-EFFECT RELATIONSHIPS: See how many examples of these you can find. Remember the little word *if* is one of your clues.

b) CONTRASTS: This is a passage in which there are many contrasts. See how many contrasts you can identify. Make your notes in the left margin of the passage. Circle key connectives.

c) COMPARISONS AND ILLUSTRATIONS: Note what use he makes of these.

d) REPETITIONS AND PROGRESSION OF THOUGHT: This passage has several examples of repetition of thought patterns and listing of items. Make note of the repetitions. Study the listing of items. Does there seem to be a progression of thought? Is there a climax?

e) DESCRIPTION: Note the positive and negative aspects of love.

f) GRAMMATICAL CONSTRUCTIONS: Study the verbs in the passage. What do you note about their tenses? Also note the personal pronouns. When are they used, and when are they not used?

3. Analyze the structure

Study the verses and bracket those which seem to focus on the same idea. The diagram itself provides a clue for bracketing. Try to summarize the main idea in each section with a phrase.

Consider also the order in which Paul arranged his ideas. Are they arranged logically or psychologically?

1 Corinthians 13

1. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels,
but have not love,
I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
2. And if I have prophetic powers,
and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,
and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,
but have not love,
I am nothing.
3. If I give away all I have,
and if I deliver my body to be burned,
but have not love,
I gain nothing.
4. Love is patient and kind;
love is not jealous or boastful;
5. it is not arrogant or rude.
Love does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful;
6. it does not rejoice at wrong,
but rejoices in the right.
7. Love bears all things,
believes all things,
hopes all things,
endures all things.
8. Love never ends;
as for prophecies, they will pass away;
as for tongues, they will cease;
as for knowledge, it will pass away.
9. For our knowledge is imperfect
and our prophecy is imperfect;
10. but when the perfect comes,
the imperfect will pass away.
11. When I was a child,
I spoke like a child,
I thought like a child,
I reasoned like a child;
when I became a man,
I gave up childish ways.
12. For now we see in a mirror dimly,
but then face to face.
Now I know in part;
then I shall understand fully,
even as I have been fully understood.
13. So faith, hope, love abide, these three;
but the greatest of these is love.

Practice B – Seek to Know Meanings

1. Ask yourself questions

While you may be very familiar with this passage and even have memorized it, you still need to think seriously about what Paul means by the words he is saying. So far, you have only been observing the details, but hopefully you have also been asking yourself some “I wonder” questions about the meaning of some of the words and statements. Our concern is what Paul meant by what he said. Let us review some of the kinds of questions you might be asking yourself:

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

Example

Scripture Passage	Questions for Understanding
1. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.	Why the emphasis on <i>angels</i> as well as <i>men</i> ? Why begin with the conditional clause, “If I . . .”? Meaning of <i>love</i> ? Meaning of <i>noisy gong</i> ? <i>clanging cymbal</i> ? Significance of these illustrations? Significance of present tense verb, <i>I am</i> Relationship between <i>have not love</i> and being a <i>noisy gong</i> ?

I have given you an example of the kinds of questions you might ask yourself about statements and words in the first verse.

If there are several in your group, divide the sections of the chapter among you so that you work with only a few of the verses. Ask yourself some “questions for understanding,” and record these in the right margin of the printed copy of the chapter. Then share these questions with those in your group.

2. Answering questions

Remember that the asking of questions is to stimulate your thinking and to serve as a guide for identifying those words, phrases, and statements which need interpretation. You may ask more questions than you can or need to answer. You are to select those which seem to be the most relevant for answering. Surely in this passage, the key word *love* must be interpreted. What did Paul mean by the word *love*? But there are other statements which also need interpreting.

Select some of the questions you asked regarding one section of the chapter and seek to answer them by doing some of these things:

- *define* words;
- *compare* translations;
- *study* cross-references;
- *wrestle* with meanings.

In seeking to interpret the message of chapter, it is very important that you wrestle with meanings: What is Paul really trying to say as to the importance of love? Why did he arrange his thoughts in the order he did? Why does he describe both the positive and negative aspects of love?

NOTE: Read Chapter 6, “Ways to Interpret,” to gain more detailed information on how to ask questions and how to interpret passages.

► Practice C – Personalize Biblical Teachings

When Paul describes love, he approaches it in an impersonal way, “Love is . . .” But everything he says about love has to do with personal relationships—especially difficult personal relationships. Possibly this is the reason for the emphasis on the negative aspect—“Love is not . . .” We know that Paul is speaking about a special kind of love—*agape*—a self-giving love which God extends to us through Christ. But what about ourselves, how do we actualize it in our own lives?

Evaluation

Are Paul’s statements in this chapter valid for our relationships of today?

Application and Actualization

Review 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. Consider seriously the way Paul describes what love is and what it is not.

1. Think about a problem situation in which there are conflicts, disagreements, misunderstandings—a real situation in which you have been involved or are now involved.

Present situation: What can you actually do if you are going to demonstrate these evidences of love as described in 13:4-7? What might be the outcomes?

Previous situation: To what extent did or did you not demonstrate these evidences of love? What were the results? How might the results have been different?

2. Share with your group a situation in which you need to demonstrate love. Invite them to pray with you about this situation.

NOTE: Read Chapter 13, “Personalizing Biblical Teachings,” for more detailed discussion on how to apply and actualize biblical truths.