

- ☛ encourage us (see Romans 15:4);
- ☛ give us faith (see Romans 10:17);
- ☛ equip us to do good (see 2 Timothy 3:16-17);
- ☛ help us see ourselves as we really are (see James 1:23-25).

When Jesus and Satan were battling it out in the desert (see Matthew 4:1-11), they probably could have used any weapon they wanted. But they decided to pass on the usual tools of warfare. Instead, the Creator of the universe and the most evil being in the universe used the most powerful weapon in the universe. They used one thing and one thing only—the Scriptures. Each time Satan tried to tempt Jesus by perverting God’s Word, Jesus responded with the truth of that Word. In short, Christ defeated Satan by using “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:17).

To me that says *power*—more power than I can even begin to imagine. But how can we plug into that power? How can you and I really absorb and understand the fullest and richest depths of that power?

The bad news is we can’t—not on our own. You see, Scripture is not a series of inert sentences that we can categorize, analyze, and wrap up in a tidy little box (though many a theologian has tried). It is *alive and active*. Once it gets into our souls, it moves about, challenging and encouraging us in different ways at different times. Scripture is a living part of God (His breath), and to fully understand it would be as impossible as for us to fully understand God.

Yes, it’s important to study Scripture, to use commentaries, to search for its literal meaning. But that’s only the beginning. The real key to understanding Scripture is to put it into the hands of the Master Surgeon and ask Him to use it as He intended—to ask Him to use this tool that is *sharper than any double-edged sword* (Hebrews 4:12) to cut away our dying flesh while nurturing and growing our eternal souls.

So, as important as the study of Scripture may be, it means nothing on its own. The only real understanding of Scripture comes as we ask the Lord to bring it to life personally.

There is much talk about the Holy Spirit’s work in the Church today. But in the debates and discussions we frequently forget one of His primary jobs. Perhaps Jesus put it best in His farewell address to His disciples: “But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). He is our Tutor. He is our Instructor. He is our Guide.

All this to say: No matter how sincere and dedicated we may be in our pursuit to understand Scripture, our intellectual gymnastics will bring minimal results at best. Instead, the key is to go back to the road to Emmaus. We must once again depend upon the Lord. Like the disciples, we may be exhausted, perplexed, even angry at difficulties and confusion. But if we are willing to ask the Author for understanding, He is willing to breathe life into our understanding of His Words—which in turn breathes life into our souls.

Understanding God

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me. (Revelation 3:20)

If I had run out and asked the first woman I met to marry me, she probably would have died laughing. Why? Because I’m such a strange and absurd character? Maybe. But more likely because she didn’t know me.

How could we have solved that? We’d communicate. I’d talk, she’d listen. She’d talk, I’d listen. Gradually, we’d get to know each other. And, if the chemistry was right, we might fall in love.

That’s what Christ wants. He wants us to know Him so deeply, understand Him so intimately, that we can’t help but fall in love with Him.

Yet somehow, we think we can short-circuit that understanding-and-falling-in-love process. We think that we can just sort of wake up one morning and instantly know Him, or at best show up once a week and listen to someone chatter about Him for 20 to 30 minutes and BINGO: instant love.

But knowing people through secondhand information is not really knowing them. Before I finally married, I got to know my wife-to-be personally. I did not rely on someone else’s description. The same is true with God. There are no instant shortcuts. The only way to really know Him and to really fall in love with Him is through personal, one-on-one *communication* with Him.

And, as obvious as it may sound, we communicate with God in much the same way as we communicate with others: through talking and listening.

Talking

The most common way of talking to God is through prayer. At the beginning stages we may treat prayer like a Christmas list and God as our private Santa Claus. Or as Bob Dylan sings, we may “think He’s just an errand boy to satisfy [our] wandering desires.”¹ But as we mature, we begin to understand deeper forms of prayer. We begin to experience the depths and mysteries that are unlocked through singing, worshiping, and praising. Eventually we may even begin to experience the intense peace of just sitting quietly before Him in awe.

But expressing ourselves is only half of the communication process. The other half lies in...

Listening

The most obvious way of listening to God is through His Word. We’ve already discussed the power Scripture has to transform our lives. But the transformation doesn’t stop there. People who are transformed by Scripture are often used by God to help in His transformation of others. I know people who have made tremendous changes in the world who simply point to the few minutes a day they spend with Scripture as a major source of their strength.

1. Dylan, Bob, “When You Gonna Wake Up?” from the album *Slow Train Coming*, Columbia Records/CBS Inc., 1979.

Then there's the type of listening that comes from observing God's work in our lives. Now I don't believe every sneeze and hiccup is a sign from God. But I do believe if we ask for wisdom we can often see His hand and hear His voice in various circumstances.

There's another type of listening—the listening that involves observing God's awesome handiwork in creation. They say you really don't know an artist until you've seen his work. Likewise, there's probably no better way of learning of God's love than by drinking in the splendor of His creation. By creation we're not just talking pretty sunsets in the Bahamas. There's also the day-to-day creation of you—the new person you become as you dwell on the love and faithfulness He's shown to you in the past, or the goodness He's worked in other people's lives.

Finally, there is the type of listening that comes when we have quieted our soul enough to hear what Scripture calls that “gentle whisper”—that gentle nudging of the Holy Spirit as He softly guides and directs (see 1 Kings 19:11-12).

This is how we grow to understand God. By communicating with Him. By taking the time to talk and to listen. There is no other way to truly understand Who He is. And, as we begin to understand Who He is, there is no other choice we have but to fall in love.

An Understanding that Leads to Obedience

This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. (1 John 5:3-4)

When my wife and I were first married there were dozens of things I did or didn't do that drove her crazy. But as I got to know her and fell more deeply in love with her I slowly changed. Not because I *had* to, but because I *wanted* to. As we drew closer and closer and I saw the pain and disappointment my shortcomings caused her, I did my best to change. Not for her, but for me—for the satisfaction I experienced from pleasing her. Of course, I'm still light-years from being the perfect husband, but at least I'm heading in that direction. Not because I have to, but because I want to.

The same is true with sin and our relationship with Jesus. As we fall in love with Him, we slowly find that the areas of our disobedience begin to lose their appeal. Oh, we may still enjoy them, but experiencing the disappointment of our Greatest Love, or the momentary separation we feel from committing that sin—well, it's simply not worth the price of admission. We slowly find ourselves starting to change, to conform to Christ's image—not because we have to, but because we want to.

Now it's not always easy. Yes, there are times we have to bear down, using every ounce of self-control, fasting and praying for the strength to obey (or even the desire to obey). But the joy and satisfaction that obedience brings to our Lord, and hence to ourselves, make it all worthwhile. So, as with everything else, we see that the key to understanding obedience lies in Jesus.

Obedience is not making up and following strict religious do's and don'ts. God desires relationships, not religion. He yearns for us; He

woos us to become His Bride. He calls for us to become lovers, not legalists.

With that in mind, there's only one way we can ever really understand and obtain lasting obedience. And it usually calls for very little effort on our part. All we have to do is allow ourselves to fall so deeply and totally in love with Jesus Christ that the obedience in our souls comes naturally—as naturally as falling into His arms.

Understanding Ourselves

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear. (1 John 4:18)

As we continue to look into understanding and Jesus' role in helping us truly understand, let's turn next to ourselves.

I have a pet theory. It probably would never hold water in the scientific community, but I definitely see it in my own life and I'm beginning to see it more and more in others. It's fairly simple and goes like this: My insecurities, my selfishness, my petty jealousies, my fears and worries, my mental stress, my failures with others, my self-hatred, my emotional turmoils, even my very sins come for one reason and one reason only—I simply do not know how loved I am.

How could I possibly worry over the details in my life if I really understood a love that knows the number of hairs on my head and cares for each one of them (see Luke 12:7)?

How could I possibly be selfish if I really understood a love that will supply my every need?

How could I possibly be jealous, insecure, and fearful around others if I really understood I was created for God's pleasure and that He is already delighting in me?

How could I be discouraged in my failures if God knows I'm but dust and still rejoices over me?

How could I possibly sin if I really understood that the do's and don'ts were created out of love for my well-being, and that each intentional failure on my part pierces my Lover's heart?

Once again, the key to true understanding (this time of ourselves) lies with Jesus. As we allow Him to scoop us into His arms and hold us tightly to His breast, our cares and shortcomings begin to fade. We begin to see ourselves as He sees us. Nothing, not even our own self-condemning natures, can touch us when we're held tightly in His arms.

The only way to understand that intense, all-consuming love is to understand the Lover. And, as we understand Christ, our view of ourselves changes. We begin to see ourselves through His eyes.

Perhaps that is what Jesus meant when He promised to give us His peace, a peace Paul described as “peace...which transcends [exceeds] all understanding” (Philippians 4:7; see also John 14:27). Peace with God and, as our perceptions are conformed to His, peace with ourselves.

Understanding Others

We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:19)

Before we leave this lesson's topic of understanding, there's one other aspect we should explore.

Several years ago I was pulling into a parking space at the local supermarket when another car roared in from the wrong direction, cut me off, and took the place. The scene is still vivid in my memory, not because of the driver's rudeness (hey, I live near L.A.—I see rudeness every day), but because of my reaction. Instead of anger and outrage, I felt pity. For a few moments I was actually able to see the offender through Christ's eyes. And this is what I saw:

As far as the driver was concerned, he was an orphan. He had nobody to look out for him. Anything he got he had to take. He did not know the loving Father in heaven Who cared for him. He had to take and scrape and scratch and fight all on his own. I was moved with compassion for him. I wish I could react this way all the time. For a few brief moments I was close enough to Christ's heart to see another human being as He sees him. And, instead of anger, I was moved with pity.

This sensitivity happens far too seldom in my life. But I do remember another time—a time when I was emotionally beat up and scathed by a Christian friend I was trying to help. Instead of anger and resentment I was again able to see him through Christ's eyes. This time I saw my friend as a precious animal hit by a car and left lying on the side of the road. If you've ever tried to help such an animal, you know that your compassionate attempts can be met with vicious bites and attacks. Like an injured animal, my friend was frightened, and he was in pain. He struck out at me—not because of anything I'd done, and not because of anything he was—but because he was petrified, because he was scared to death. At that moment he simply did not have the assurance that he was really loved and cared for. At that moment he simply did not know how loved he was.

As you and I continue on our road to Emmaus and allow Christ to instruct us, we start to enter into true understanding. We start to understand God, Scripture, obedience, even ourselves. And finally, we start to understand others. We begin to see others as people in desperate need of that same relationship with Christ, that same all-encompassing love. We begin to understand that those who have hurt or offended us are not really the *offenders*, but that they are really the *offended*. We begin to see that they are not the enemy—but victims of the enemy.

And, as we begin to see that, we can't help but love them.

Study Questions

Before you begin your study this week:

- ☞ Pray and ask God to speak to you through His Holy Spirit.
- ☞ Use only the Bible for your answers.
- ☞ Write down your answers and the verses you used.
- ☞ Answer the “Challenge” questions if you have the time and want to do them.
- ☞ Share your answers to the “Personal” questions with the class only if you want to share them.

First Day: Read the Commentary “The Road to Understanding.”

1. What meaningful or new thought did you find in the commentary “The Road to Understanding ” or from your teacher’s lecture?

2. Look for a verse in the lesson to memorize this week. Write it down, carry it with you, or post it in a prominent place. Make a real effort to learn the verse and its “address” (reference of where it is found in the Bible).

Because our finite minds can’t comprehend the depth of God’s love, we tend to shorten the gap Jesus had to bridge between the Father and us. We raise our position of “goodness” just a touch and try to lower God’s just a tad. Not only does this mean we short-change God on His glory, but it also means we start to take our access to Him for granted. We may almost flippantly approach His throne, forgetting His awesome purity, His glory, His perfect righteousness.

Second Day:

Before we begin to look into Christ’s work of righteousness in our lives, let us remind ourselves exactly Who God is, so that we may realize the righteousness we must possess in order to enter His presence.

1. Many examples in the Old Testament help us understand just how holy God is. Exodus 19:10-13 takes place after the Israelites came out of Egypt, just prior to the law being given. In preparation for God to descend upon Mount Sinai, the people were to consecrate themselves, wash their clothes, and abstain from sexual relations for three days. From verses 12-13, what additional restrictions were given to the people and what would be the result if they failed to obey?

2. God had instructed Moses to build the Ark of the Covenant of acacia wood overlaid with gold. It was placed in the Most Holy Place within the tabernacle (see Exodus 25:8-22; 26:30-35). God’s presence dwelt above the ark, making the ark extremely holy. God’s holiness was demonstrated in 1 Chronicles 13:7-10, when the Ark of the Covenant was being transported from one place to another. It was not being transported according to the instructions God had given to them (see Exodus 25:12-15; Numbers 4:15). From 1 Chronicles 13:7-10, describe what happened and what the result was.

3. Read 1 Samuel 6:19a. What happened when a number of people looked into the ark of the Lord?

4. Moses asked God to allow him to see His glory. From Exodus 33:20, what was God's response?
5. What does 1 Timothy 6:15b-16 say about God?
6. Personal: Do today's passages change the way you think of God? ...of your own righteousness? If so, how?

Third Day:

Once we begin to understand just how terrifying and intensely pure God is, we can begin to appreciate the distance Christ's sacrifice bridged for us.

1. Read Romans 3:23. If we compare ourselves to God's glory—His purity and righteousness—what is the result?
2. Describe our righteous acts from Isaiah 64:6a.
3. We are sinful and hopeless, without any chance of ever approaching the perfect, intensely pure God on our own. But, from the beginning, God required only one thing to cleanse us of sin. From Hebrews 9:22, what is the only thing that can bring about the forgiveness of our sin?
4. The sacrifices offered at the tabernacle and later at the temple were not a permanent answer to our problem. What does Hebrews 10:4 say regarding this?
5. What do the following verses say about Jesus Christ and what He has done for us?
John 1:29

Hebrews 10:10

Hebrews 10:14
6. Personal: How does this change or amplify your understanding of what Jesus Christ has done for us all?

Fourth Day:

As we have seen, the cost of bringing us up to God's standard of righteousness was incredibly high. It called for the complete sacrifice of Jesus Christ. To really appreciate the cost He paid to make us righteous, let us look at the extent of His sacrifice.

1. The price Jesus Christ paid was enormous. From the following verses, describe what Jesus endured, both physically and emotionally.
John 13:21

Matthew 26:37-38

Matthew 27:27-31

John 19:1¹

Matthew 27:39-44

John 19:17-18 (To get a complete idea of what crucifixion entailed, you may want to look it up in an encyclopedia.)

2. The above passages list some of the physical and emotional suffering Jesus went through on our behalf, but this was not the worst of it. From 2 Corinthians 5:21, describe the original condition of Jesus Christ and what happened to Him.
3. Describe what happened in Matthew 27:46.
4. Personal: These truths should never cease to amaze us and make us grateful. Write a song, psalm, or prayer expressing your gratitude to the Lord.

Fifth Day:

During this week we have read about how all-encompassing the sacrifice of Jesus Christ was.

1. Read John 3:16-18 and Acts 10:43. Who benefits from this sacrifice, and what must a person do to receive these benefits? What is the state of the person who does not do this?
2. Once we put our faith in Jesus, our sin is forgiven, and we are given the perfect righteousness He purchased for us. Along with all this, the privileges and benefits we receive are quite literally out of this world. Read John 1:12-13. When we believe in His name and receive Him, what do we become?
3. Read Romans 8:17a. If we are God's children, what else does that make us?
4. a. Read Ephesians 1:13b. When you believe, what else happens?

1. "The scourging of Jesus was the usual accompaniment of crucifixion. The Roman scourge consisted of a wooden handle to which several rawhide thongs were fastened. Into each thong small butterfly shaped pieces of metal or bone were fixed. Wielded by a powerful arm, the scourge was a deadly weapon, which in a few strokes would strip the flesh from a man's back. Frequently death followed immediately so that the victim did not survive for crucifixion." (Frank E. Gaebelin, editor. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), notes on John 19:1)

- b. Read Galatians 5:19-23. Instead of being filled with discord (see verses 19-21), how do our lives begin to change after we believe (verses 22-23)?

5. According to Hebrews 4:16, what are we now permitted to do?

6. Personal: These are only a few of the benefits that result when we receive Christ. If you have accepted Jesus Christ, briefly write what major differences He has made in your life.

Sixth Day:

Most people recognize that they are not the person they would like to be. We say or do things that we regret. We hurt others with our words. Our attitudes and actions often do not bring peace, but chaos. But there is good news for the Christian.

1. Read Romans 3:22a and 4:5, and Philippians 3:8-9. What has been credited or given to those of us who have put our faith in the Lord?

2. Read Romans 6:22a. What have we been set free from?

3. When we put our faith in Christ, God sets us free from the power of sin and credits His righteousness to us. Then, as we learned yesterday, His Spirit begins to work in us. What does Romans 8:28-29 say He is doing (pay particular attention to verse 29)?

4. God is working in us to cause us to bear the fruit of His Spirit—that is, to make us like His Son. What does Paul say about this in Philippians 3:12-14?

5. What promise have we been given according to Philippians 1:6, and Who is doing the work?

6. Personal: Do you desire to be the person God has created you to be? Remember, when you sin, go to God, confessing your sin, and He will forgive you. Then get up and continue to walk with the Lord. Write Philippians 3:13b-14, inserting your own name.