
Bible Study:



exploring fruitfulness

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The Bible is full of word pictures that provide us with rich and fresh ways to understand God’s truth. In this special-section Bible study, we will use fruitbearing as an example to help you learn how to study a word picture on your own.

After we identify key passages, we’ll apply three basic Bible study steps: (1) observation, (2) interpretation, and (3) application.

Identify the Passages

When you study a word picture such as fruitbearing, you could focus on a single passage in which the image occurs. However, it’s insightful to trace the word picture through the Bible by doing a topical study of it. (You can use this method with other topics as well. For example, studies of “faithfulness,” “temples,” and “healing” would all be topical studies.)

You’ll need to identify the passages to consider before you can begin your study. Start by listing key words associated with your word picture, then use a concordance to do word searches. For this study, we started by looking up words from John 15 such as fruit, vine, and branch. We also searched for related words such as crop, harvest, and tree. Cross-references, topical Bibles, and searches on corresponding Greek and Hebrew words provided additional passages. (To find websites that provide these Bible-study tools, click on “Access DJ Online Bible Study Resources” at discipleshipjournal.com, then scroll down to “November/December 2003, Bible Study Resources on the Web.”)

These searches yielded many passages, so we decided to narrow our focus to those in the New Testament that talk about a fruitful life.

Following are the passages that we’ll use for this study. Though the list isn’t comprehensive, it will still provide an in-depth study. Don’t feel that you need to finish in one sitting; take your time to work through the passages.

Mt. 3:1-12 (also in Lk. 3:1-18)
Mt. 7:15-23
Mt. 12:22-37
Mt. 21:33-46 (also in Mk. 12:1-12 and Lk. 20:9-19)
Lk. 13:1-9

word pictures

We’re using the term word pictures to cover a variety of literary and prophetic devices: metaphors, similes, parables, analogies, symbols, etc.

Jn. 15:1-17
Ro. 7:4-6
Ro. 11:11-24
Gal. 5:16-26
Eph. 5:8-13
Phil. 1:9-11
Col. 1:3-14
2 Pet. 1:3-9

Step 1: Observation

1. Now we're ready to begin the general Bible-study step of reading each passage closely as we ask "What does it say?" Often, observation questions are based on those old standbys: who, what, when, where, why, and how.

List each reference on your note paper, then write answers to the questions below—along with any other observations.

- a. Who is talking or writing?
- b. Who is the audience for this message? (e.g., Pharisees, disciples, the church)
- c. What, if anything, prompted the statement about fruit?
- d. What is the tone of the passage? (Kind? Stern? Matter-of-fact?)
- e. What, if anything, does the passage say is producing fruit?
- f. If possible, note what the passage says that "fruit" stands for.
- g. Does the passage promise or warn about something? If so, write it down.
- h. Is fruitbearing the point of this passage, or is the fruit analogy being used to help explain another concept?
- i. If so, what is passage's larger message?
- j. Sum up what the passage says about fruit, branches, roots, etc.

an alternative

Using an online Bible-study site, copy and paste the Scripture passages into a word processing file. This will give you a clean version of all the passages to mark up as you make observations.

Step 2: Interpretation

In this step we're asking, "What does this passage mean?" Sometimes word pictures are fairly simple to understand ("The Lord is my shepherd" [Ps. 23:1]); at other times they are more difficult ("I saw a beast coming out of the sea" [Rev. 13:1]). As you encounter word pictures in the Bible, keep in mind the following principles.

- Use the context of the passage to find the meaning the speaker or author intends.

- Assume the plain meaning first. When Jesus says, “I will not drink this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father’s kingdom” (Mt. 26:29), assume He means “drink wine.”
- Remember the audience. Consider if the word picture might have had a specific meaning to the original hearers. For example, when Jesus says in John 15 that He is the vine, particular kinds of vines might have come to His hearers’ minds. In this case, the primary association is with grape vines. (You may need to consult a Bible dictionary or commentary to learn this type of background information.)
- Draw connections carefully. It’s not enough that passages have the word picture in common. The word picture has to be used in the same way in order for you to draw connections (and avoid quirky interpretations). For example, “be fruitful” in Genesis (1:28; 9:1,7; 35:11) can mean, “Go out and have children.” You’d want to be cautious of therefore assuming that Jesus’ John 15 command to His disciples to “bear fruit” means to go start families!
- Don’t overinterpret. It may be tempting to list all the qualities of fruit, vines, and branches and then try to find a spiritual analogy that fits each one. Don’t. Instead, stick with the qualities that fit the word picture as it’s used in the passage.

2. Keeping these principles in mind, revisit your passages, and try to state in plain words what is meant by the “fruit” language. For example, in Mt. 3:1-12, John the Baptist is saying, “If you’re truly repenting, show evidence of it in your lives. If you don’t, you’ll be cut off from God and judged.”

3. Now, look for patterns and connections in the passages. As you do, here are some questions to consider.

- Are there variations in the ways the word picture is used? If so, do those different uses have components in common?
- In the gospels, to whom are many of the messages about fruitbearing given? How does the audience shift as you move into the epistles? Are there any conclusions you can draw from that?
- Do you notice differences between how Jesus talked to the Pharisees versus how He talked to His disciples? Does anything shift as the apostles talk to early Christians?
- What role does God play in fruitbearing? Do different members of the Trinity (Father, Jesus, or Holy Spirit) play different roles?
- What is the role of God’s followers in fruitbearing?

As we studied this topic, a key thought emerged: The output of a person’s life is consistent with the source that life taps into. A life connected to God should produce results consistent with God’s character and work. A life disconnected from God will produce false, fake, or no results. The key isn’t the results (though they are indicators), but the source.

Step 3: Application

4. The final step of Bible study is to ask, “How should this passage shape my life?” Sometimes that shaping is simple and practical: “God says to be hospitable, so I’m going to invite my children’s friends over more often.” At other times, the application will be deeply personal and won’t have a specific action attached.

Here are some questions to consider as you let these truths about fruitbearing shape your life.

- Did you have any “aha” moments as you made your observations or interpretations?

- Did you sense God saying anything to you personally as you studied the passages?

- What stood out to you as the key thought from these passages? How would—or should—that thought shape your life?

- How could you better cooperate with the Holy Spirit so He can produce His fruit in you?