

How to Study the Bible: Lesson 6.

Examining the context of a verse.

Leaders Notes:

The first part of the study takes a selection from Melvin's Moby Dick. The lesson begins by just showing two lines without any context and asking people to consider the meaning of the two lines.

When the PDF is printed single sided on 8.5" x 11" paper these lines will appear in the same position on the next page. This is to provide a visual effect that they are looking at the same thing but with more information. Ask the students to consider the added context and decide the meaning of the two lines again. The first example ends with providing the correct answer.

The lesson progresses with an example taken from Scripture using Mark 3:33.

This is a difficult example and will challenge most people as they determine the complete context for Mark 3:33. The context must include Mark 3:21. But to completely understand all this is going on one must be aware of the growing opposition against Christ and His ministry. which means we must go as far back as Mark 1:14.

Even after examining the context of Mark 3:33 there remains room for misunderstanding the lesson Christ is teaching. Therefore, the lesson continues to include a couple of verses as cross-references. The students can practice finding the context of these verses also by summarizing the lessons learned from Mark 3:33 as time permits.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Would you want to base your eternal choices on information without knowing the context?
- 2) Who is ultimately responsible for deciding what you should believe?
- 3) How much Bible studying can you delegate to others?
 - a. This is a tricky question.
 - i. If you were to say none of it can be delegated, that would mean you cannot use commentaries and must become an expert in 3 ancient languages, a vast amount of history as well as many other fields.
 - b. You cannot do it all.
- 4) How much can you depend on church leaders to teach you the Bible correctly?
 - a. You come to know this as you check out what they teach over time. There are many false teachers, and a person must be alert and evaluate the teachings with their own good study habits.
 - b. You will recognize good teaching more readily as you grow in understanding the things of God and you will not have to check out as many things. Keeping notes is an important and valuable study tool.
 - c. Notice how church leaders develop the teaching.
 - i. Are they using good study methods and teaching others how to study also?
 - ii. Are questions appreciated?
 - iii. Are different views discussed and weighed? Some churches are extremely dogmatic and intolerant of accepting the possibility of a different understanding or that a definitive meaning is not always possible.

Read the verse below and answer the questions.

2

3

4 In olden times an eagle swooped down upon the New England coast

5 and carried off an infant Indian in his talons.

Which sentence below best describes the meaning of lines 4 and 5?

- a) It shows how Indians were able to use animals.
- b) It illustrates the cooperation between Indians and birds.
- c) It describes how an eagle once saved a human infant.
- d) It is part of a legend describing the discovery of a certain island.
- e) It discusses the perilous dangers faced by Indians living in the wild.

- 1 Look now at the wondrous traditional story
- 2 of how this island was settled by the red-men.
- 3 Thus goes the legend.
- 4 **In olden times an eagle swooped down upon the New England coast**
- 5 **and carried off an infant Indian in his talons.**
- 6 With loud lament the parents
- 7 saw their child borne out of sight over the wide waters.
- 8 They resolved to follow in the same direction.
- 9 Setting out in their canoes,
- 10 after a perilous passage they discovered the island,
- 11 and there they found an empty ivory casket,—
- 12 the poor little Indian's skeleton.

(Moby Dick chapter 14 the 3rd from the last paragraph.)

Which sentence below best describes the meaning of verses 4 and 5?

- a) It shows how Indians were able to use animals.
- b) It illustrates the cooperation between Indians and birds.
- c) It describes how an eagle once saved a human infant.
- d) It is part of a legend explaining the discovery of a certain island.
- e) It discusses the perilous dangers faced by Indians living in the wild.

Did you choose “D”? “D” is the correct answer.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Would you want to base your eternal choices on information without knowing the context of the information?
- 2) Who is ultimately responsible for deciding what you believe?
- 3) How much of your bible studying can you delegate to others and how much should you do yourself? We cannot reinvent the wheel, which is to say, “study only from the Bible: without knowing the original languages.” We benefit so much from the research and insight of those before us and the study tools they have developed. We are responsible for our own careful considerations of the text and these issues involved in our interpretation, understanding and application of the Bible. More complexities of Bible study will be introduced as the lessons continued.

Now let us take an example from Scripture.

Mark 3:33 Answering them, He said, “Who are My mother and My brothers?” NASB95

Which sentence below best describes why Jesus said this?

- a) Jesus was just angry with His family and pretended not to know them just to be mean to them.
- b) Jesus no longer recognized His family.
- c) Jesus said this to illustrate that those who serve God are our true relatives.
- d) Jesus said this because he knew His family was there to oppose Him.
- e) Jesus did not know who His family was because He was an orphan.

You are going to have difficulty choosing between these choices if you are not familiar with the life of Jesus Christ. If you are already familiar with this verse and its surrounding context you can probably narrow it down to two choices. Then again you may get it wrong.

Now, take a few minutes to look in your Bible at the surrounding verses to see how they shed light on verse 33. What verses form the context? What verses must a person read to understand the meaning of verse 33? Which answer above would you chose now, after reading it in context?

I have outlined the first three chapters of Mark in detail below to help find the context of the verse. From the outline, I have also summarized the first 3 chapters of Mark to help understand the big picture of what is going on leading up to this verse 33.

A summary of Mark 1-3

Once John the Baptist has prepared the way for the Lord, he baptized Jesus. Then Jesus begins His ministry. His ministry is very intense. Great crowds gather around Jesus and are greatly impressed as He heals and delivers many people.

The religious leaders who are satisfied with the status quo do not want to lose their position of power. They began having problems with the ministry of this “Jesus” fellow because many people are following Him. Jesus eats with people they consider sinners. “Oh, how impure, why, He is defiling Himself,” they thought. They do not like the way Jesus gains popularity with the crowds and interprets the law differently than they do. They felt Jesus threatened their positions of leadership and freedom to worship God. They go as far as to claim the power Jesus exhibits is from the devil himself.

Opposition against Jesus not only comes from the religious rulers. His own family becomes troubled by all this commotion and seeks to rescue Him with the claim that He has gone mad. (Notice Mark 3:20-21 is also part of the context of Mark 3:33 even though separated by more than 10 verses.) His family claimed He was insane, “He has lost His senses.” Jesus’ family may have made this claim only to rescue Him from Himself before He upsets the authorities too much. His relatives may have become embarrassed of His actions or fearful the authorities would punish Jesus by imprisonment, execution or banning Him from the synagogue. This could reflect badly on them and disgrace the entire family.

Jesus understands all of this and understands the conflict must exist. He emphasizes that the bonds that matter are those of “like mindedness” in following God. A Christian’s real family are the people who love God and has His purposes in mind.

Now after looking at the full textual context of Mark 3:33, what is the correct answer?

Outline of Mark chapters 1-3

Prolog: the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ	1:1
1. Ministry of John the Baptist	1:2 - 13
a. OT quotation descriptive of His purpose of ministry	1:2 – 3
b. Summary of the ministry of John the Baptist	1:4 – 11
i. John baptizes Jesus	1:9 – 11
2. Jesus is tempted in the wilderness	1:12 - 13
3. The Galilean ministry of Jesus	1:14 - 9:50
a. Jesus begins His ministry	1:14 - 29
i. Jesus preaches repentance in Galilee	1:14 - 15
ii. Jesus calls Simon, Andrew, James, and John	1:16 - 20
iii. Jesus teaches in the synagogue	1:21 - 22
1. A man with an unclean spirit delivered	1:23 - 26
2. Amazed witnesses	1:27 - 28
b. News of Jesus spreads throughout Galilee (His honor increases)	1:29 - 34
i. Simon’s mother-in-law healed	1:29 - 31
ii. Many afflicted people brought to Jesus	1:32 - 34
c. Jesus prays privately	1:35 - 37
d. Jesus ministers throughout all Galilee and His honor increases	1:37 - 3:12
i. Jesus leaves for Galilee	1:37 - 39
ii. Jesus heals a leper	1:40 - 45
iii. Jesus heals many in Capernaum	2:1
iv. Jesus heals a paralyzed person	2:2 – 5
e. Religious leaders challenge the honor of Jesus	2:6 - 28
i. Confrontation over forgiveness of sins (scribes)	2:6 – 13
ii. Confrontation over dining with sinners (scribes of the Pharisees)	2:14 – 17
iii. Confrontation over disciples not fasting	2:18 – 22
a. (John’s disciples fast but Jesus’ disciples do not fast)	
2. Parabolic folk saying of Bridegrooms	
3. Parabolic folk saying of cloth patch	
4. Parabolic folk saying of wine skins	
iv. Confrontation over Sabbath rest laws (Pharisees)	2:23 – 3:5
1. Confrontation harvesting on the Sabbath	2:23-28
2. Confrontation over healing on the Sabbath	3:1-5
v. Pharisees began conspiring against Jesus	3:6
f. Summary of ministry by the sea	3:7 – 12
g. Jesus appoints the twelve	3:13 – 19
h. Jesus’ family attempts to take custody of Him	3:20 - 35
i. His family becomes aware of the crowds	
when he arrives home	3:20
ii. His family decides to protect the family honor from	
shame because of Jesus’s actions (Honor / Shame)	3:21*

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- iii. Scribes attribute Jesus' miracles to Beelzebub 3:22
 - 1. Perhaps the scribes are capitalizing on His family's claim of insanity because of the similarities of insanity and possession. They are trying to dishonor Jesus.
 - 2. Jesus responds to the scribe's accusation. 3:23 – 30
 - a. A kingdom divided against itself ...
 - b. A house divided against itself ...
 - c. A strong man's house ...
 - d. Blasphemes against the Holy Spirit are not forgiven 3:28 – 30
- iv. Jesus' family arrives to take Him away 3:31 – 35*
 - 1. His family sends Jesus word of their arrival. (31)
 - 2. The crowd conveys the message to Jesus. (32)
 - 3. Jesus responds (33 -35)
 - a. Rejects His family because their motives are contrary to will of God,
 - i. to take custody of Him and protect Him from Himself by stopping His ministry
 - b. accepts "whoever does the will of God" as His family.

The type of culture in the Middle East is a "Honor/Shame" culture. This is also part of the context. Ours culture is generally a Guilt/Innocence culture, although it may be shifting. Jesus begins His ministry by performing miracles and healings. The crowds of people began following Jesus. This increased Jesus' honor. The Religious leaders must then successfully challenge the honor of Jesus or they will lose some of their own honor. This cultural insight helps us to understand the overall picture of the interactions between Jesus and the religious leaders; However, one must not take this too far as to forget the sin of the religious leaders who are fighting against God. They are indeed fighting against God and do not realize it because they care about their position of authority and power more than the things of God.

The relatives of Jesus are concerned about their honor status within the community and how the actions of Jesus may reduce their honor and status within the community by bringing shame on the family. The religious leaders' attacks on Jesus reflected poorly on His family who feared dishonor. They likely think of Jesus as being out of His league sparing with the powerful leaders. Turning water in to wine is one thing but messing with the religious leaders: well, that could get a person executed! They wanted to take custody of Jesus by claiming He was insane or out of touch with reality. They certainly thought it was abnormal for anyone to draw such large crowds like those who followed Jesus to their town. They thought it best to keep Jesus out of the public eye. That would have ended the ministry of Jesus, blocked His way to the cross, and gone against God's plan of salvation for of the entire world.

It was also a common thought in ancient times that like mindedness made for better family members than blood relations did.

It is impossible to fully understand Mark 3:31-35 if a person forgets about Mark 3:21 and does not include it in the immediate context. It is also important to trace the theme of opposition against Jesus that begins in Mark 2:6 and continues through-out the remainder of the book. To see the reason for the opposition brought by the religious leaders, one must begin with Mark 1:14.

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Other contexts often overlooked is that of geography and economics of an area. This can often provide much information to assist us in interpreting a passage correctly. There are also the social aspects of the treatment of one people group by another, such as the treatment of Samaritans by the Jews and sometimes become involved in understanding a passage.

One starts by identifying the textual context of the passage of interest. In this case it was from Mark 1:14 to 3:35 with a more immediate context of 3:21 to 3:35. We understood the passage better by knowing the Honor/Shame cultural patterns. Jesus' hometown, Nazareth was a well-to-do fishing town on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee near where the Jordan river enters. A dishonored family shunned by the community which would have much difficulty maintaining a decent lifestyle.

"C" is a good answer to the question above. But it was because of their opposition against Him that Jesus could not count them as relatives. Jesus took the opportunity to point out that those who does the will of God is his relative because His family was there to oppose Him and were not doing the will of God. It was a way to tell everyone, including His family, what God wanted of them. So "D" is the best answer. He said it because they were opposing Him, His ministry, and the will of God.