

BIBLE STUDY METHODS

Character Study¹

A character study can be done in two ways. You can use a single passage to examine the life of a biblical character, or study a character's life using multiple passages.

If you are studying a character using a single passage, choose a narrative portion of Scripture that tells the whole story of an episode or encounter, such as David facing and defeating Goliath in I Samuel 17:1-58. If you are studying the author of a book, read a passage that contains a well-rounded unit of thought, such as a whole psalm, a complete oracle for a prophet, or several connected paragraphs from an epistle.

The second approach to character study traces a single personality through several episodes in Scripture. Use a concordance to look up all the passages in which a character appears. If you choose a person who appears only a few times in the Bible such as Barnabas or Priscilla, you can do an effective study in one sitting. If you want to study one of the major characters in the Bible such as Abraham or Paul, plan on spending several study sessions exploring this personality.

Step 1: Identify the characters to study. Choose the character you want to study. After you've located the passage(s) in which the character appears, identify all the people who play significant roles in the passage(s). If some don't have names, give them brief descriptive titles—e.g. "the Centurion with the sick servant." In some passages, a group will have a collective personality. You can treat this group as an additional character.

Step 2: Research historical and cultural background. Sometimes a character may have a title or role you are not familiar with, such as cupbearer, Sadducee, publican. A Bible dictionary or other reference book will help you understand the character more fully. However, avoid looking up the specific character. Discover your own reactions to this personality first.

Step 3: Develop character sketches. Character sketches make the individual(s) you're studying come alive. Based on their actions, their words, and how others react to them, develop a mental picture of the character.

Step 4: Reflect on your reaction to the character(s). Now that your study and meditation have brought the people to life in your imagination, you may find yourself connecting with them personally. Ask yourself these questions: What is my honest reaction to each character? Why do I react this way? Can I identify with this person? Why or why not? Would I like to be more like this person? Why or why not?

Step 5: Discover the most important lesson you've learned. What difference has a close examination of the Bible character(s) made in your life? Has God given you a clearer view of yourself, your weaknesses, or your gifts that leads you to repentance or obedience? Have you gained deeper

¹ Slightly modified from Margaret Parker, (1997). Character Study. *Discipleship Journal*, 101:16-17.

understanding of someone you know? Will you relate to that person differently? Are you inspired to relate to Jesus in a new way? Write out the most important lesson you learned, the one the Holy Spirit puts on your heart. This may not be the main point of the passage, but it is where the people in the passage connect most personally with you and your current circumstances.

CHARACTER STUDY OF LUKE 19:1-10

Step 1: The Characters. Zaccheaus, the chief tax collector; Jesus; the crowd

Step 2: Historical and Cultural Background. Tax collectors were hated by the Jews of Jesus' day. They worked for the Roman occupation forces. They usually cheated people to enhance their personal wealth. Their contact with Gentiles made them unclean, so good Jews would not dine with them.

Step 3: Character Sketches. Zaccheaus had gained wealth by cheating his countrymen. To get a look at Jesus, he risked making a fool of himself by climbing a tree. Zaccheaus must have been lonely, longing for love and acceptance, because when Jesus invited Himself to dinner, Zaccheaus welcomed Him gladly. Zachaeus responded to Jesus by offering to give large sums of money to the poor and to those he had cheated.

Jesus was sensitive to those who were emotionally and spiritually needy, and He had a gift for making unlovable people feel loved. He did not care what self-righteous religious people thought about the company He kept, because He was very focused on His mission; to bring people who were lost into relationship with God. Nothing delighted Him more than seeing people accept the forgiveness He offered.

The crowd cannot imagine that Jesus would be willing, even eager, to reach out to someone who thumbed his nose at Jewish law and clearly didn't deserve saving.

Step 4: How I React. I envy Zaccheaus because he took the initiative to get what he wanted. I admire his ability to take bold steps to see and please Jesus.

Jesus' sensitivity, His eagerness to reach out to the unlovable, His focus on doing His Father's will, and His willingness to risk the displeasure of the crowd put me to shame. I am far more apt to pander to the preferences of the crowd than to care for the needy individual.

I identify most with the crowd, the conventional people who keep the rules and assume they deserve salvation. It's hard for me to maintain the sense that I am a sinner in need of forgiveness because I generally behave in ways my "good Christian friends" admire. I don't like the self-righteousness of the crowd, but I realize I share in that self-righteousness even as I condemn it.

Step 5: The Most Important Lesson for Me. I have been too passive, too lethargic in my relationship with Jesus. This week I will seize the initiative like Zacheus, spending time in God's Word and in prayer, where I can see Jesus more clearly, and trying to act decisively when He shows me what I need to do to please Him.