

A Franciscan Inspired Bible Study

How can I live the Gospel?

by Fr. Dave Mercer

Be doers of the word and not just hearers. [James 1:22]

Years ago on the Mescalero Apache Reservation, I started a Bible study admitting I have a problem. I love academic studies, which means I can easily operate out of my head. “That’s all well and good,” I said, “but I know that God wants to speak to our hearts.” Then, pointing at my head, I said, “If I’m talking too much from my head, I ask you to help me out.” Moving my hand to my heart, I continued, “Just tell me, ‘Father Dave, please bring it down to our hearts.’” Everyone nodded that they would do so.

Saint Francis approached the Sacred Scriptures with his heart, and a Franciscan inspired Bible study wants us to do the same. Francis applied the life and teachings of Jesus directly to his new life. He didn’t overthink it. He just lived it. When he died seventeen years later, his movement had spread across Europe and the Middle East.

Francis’ approach to Scripture was **Christ-centered, concrete, and practical**. God’s word is to be heard, embraced, and lived. The story is told of when he and his companions opened the Bible three times, encountering passages about giving possessions to the poor, taking nothing for the journey, and denying themselves and taking up the Cross. Francis’ response was to say that that’s what they’ll do.

Thus, the fundamental question a Franciscan asks when studying the Bible isn’t simply, “What does this text mean?” (That can still be important, though.) The question instead would be, “**How can I live this Gospel?**” It’s also a good question for an everyday Catholic living an everyday faith wherever one’s vocation and mission takes them.

Let’s consider a Bible study method that follows Francis’ approach of being **Christ-centered, concrete, and practical**. This Franciscan inspired outline is best suited for the Gospels (especially Luke and John), Acts, and the Wisdom literature, such as Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Sirach, Wisdom, and even James. Using Psalms of Praise as prayers is a great fit, too.

This Bible study method has seven distinct steps. Our printable [Franciscan Worksheet](#), [Study Questions](#), and [Catholic Resources and Commentaries](#) can help guide your group through the steps.

Prayer. Always gather the group with a simple ice-breaker question, such as, what was your favorite, but unexpected, event this past week? Then, ~~pray for the grace to hear God’s message,~~ or to understand what God is revealing for you today. You might choose from this [list of Franciscan prayers](#), or from this list of [prayers before studying](#), or St. John Chrisostom’s [Prayer before Reading the Bible](#).

Receive. Someone reads the scheduled passage prayerfully, while others simply listen, perhaps noting in their hearts what speaks to their hearts. God has a message to be received as a gift and not merely something to be analyzed. Then, read the passage a second time, perhaps highlighting the words that resonate, or writing them in a journal or on the Worksheet. Note what begins to shape the message that will be God's gift to you.

See Christ. What does this passage reveal about Jesus? If the passage is from the Old Testament, how might it find its fulfillment in Jesus? Be willing to wrestle with the passage before you. You might start with journalism's "Five Ws and an H"—Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?—and then go deeper with the Study Questions, but keep before you the fundamental Franciscan question: *How can I live this Gospel, or how can I live this passage?*

If wrestling with the Scriptures and how Francis responded raises questions that the group can't answer, our Catholic Resources offers ways to find answers to questions needing more expertise, including a website and the easy use of an A.I. assistant. It also discusses study Bibles.

See differently. The group can take turns reading relevant sections of a commentary for the insights of a scholar. Consider those listed on the Catholic Resources. Also, Catholic study Bibles are known for footnoted insights and cross-referenced passages, which a group member can read aloud. The group can also note how earlier questions now have answers and—this is very Franciscan—**whom the passage invites us to see as a sister or brother.**

Notice how the insights help the group see the world differently. Franciscan spirituality sees God's goodness in creation and that the people one meets are brothers and sisters, especially the poor and those living at the margins of life.

Become. The group now reads the Scripture passage again, benefiting from the discussion and scholarly insights, then takes five minutes to contemplate the message God offers as a gift. What change does this Word ask of us? What attitude of Christ are we invited to adopt? Saint Francis' own life sets before us a high standard that is **Christ-centered, concrete, and practical.**

The **Incarnation** was especially important to Francis, who was captivated by the humility of God: Christ at Bethlehem, Christ in the Eucharist, Christ suffering on the Cross, Christ encountered in the poor and especially the leper. Bible study participants can take a few moments to consider how the Word of God can become **visible and tangible** in their lives.

Do. Francis didn't merely admire the Gospel; he acted on it. Write down one concrete action you can take to live what you heard. Those who would like to, can share those steps with the group.

Praise and give thanks. It's very Franciscan to end with praise and gratitude. Consider [praying Psalms](#) 23, 27, 103, 119, 139, and 145, either together or verse-by-verse. Also consider the early Christian poem praising Jesus' humility in the Incarnation, at [Philippians 2:5-11](#).

Back on the Mescalero Reservation, nobody told me I was talking too much from the head and not from the heart. Gathered as we were to share our heartfelt insights about Sacred Scripture, we knew that the Lord was talking with us from the heart, and we could only do the same in return.