

A Word Study

By Stephen Presley

Pre-Session Assignments

One week before the session, participants will take the following assignments.

Assignment One

Read Ephesians 4 and identify any key terms that seem significant or are repeated. Then read through Ephesians 4 in two different Bible translations and identify any different words for the key terms you identified. Prepare to share some of these differences and explain how the different terms impact the meaning.

Assignment Two

Read Romans 15:16; Ephesians 5:2; Philippians 4:18; and Hebrews 10:5–18. Prepare to explain how each of them interprets the concept of “offering”. Explain the similarities and differences in each of the uses.

Assignment Three

Read the account of Mary’s pouring ointment on the feet of Jesus in John 12:1–8. Prepare to explain the effect of the perfume. Then explain how the use of “fragrant aroma” relates to the other uses of similar terms that appear in 2 Corinthians 2:14–6; Ephesians 5:2; and Philippians 4:15–18.

Scripture to Memorize

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Ephesians 5:1–2

Session Goal

Consistent with God’s Word and in the power of the Holy Spirit—by the end of this session, disciples will be able to work through the steps of a word study and become even more effective in their Bible study.

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Before coming to Southwestern, he lived in Saint Andrews, Scotland, where he played a lot of golf and occasionally studied theology. Stephen is married to Haley, and they have four young children: Isla, Emma, Luke, and Drew, who keep them busy with lots of adventures. He has served in a variety of positions in the church and participated in many mission trips throughout the U.S., Central America, and Europe. Contact him at: spresley@swbts.edu.

It's in the Book

30 minutes

Real-Life Scenario

Fireflies are truly amazing creatures. I love watching them light up the yard in the summertime as the sun is setting. It's fun to chase them, catch them, hold them in your hand, and watch the lights flicker. But while fireflies are cool critters and have a great name, they are obviously not on fire. Nor are they actually flies (they are related to beetles). Some people even call them lightning bugs, which is also confusing since they are tiny bugs and have nothing to do with lighting.

Fireflies are not the only insects with funny names. Think about a butterfly or daddy longlegs. These insect names remind us that words don't always have straightforward meanings. This is why we need to study words closely, especially important words in the Bible.

Read Ephesians 5:1–2 out loud.

What Is a Word Study?

Studying words closely is essential for any good student of the Bible. Good theology is bound up in every single word. Of course, Scripture is especially challenging since it was originally written in Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament). Every English version of the Bible is a translation, so the study of every word must consider how the terms were understood in their original languages.

To do a word study, you need a good concordance. A concordance is a basic tool that lists all uses of any word in the Bible. Concordances correspond to particular Bible translations. For example, if you have the ESV translation, you want a copy of *The ESV Exhaustive Concordance*. Or choose "Search the Bible" at www.blueletterbible.com or do a "Keyword Search" at www.biblegateway.com/keyword.

The following steps outline the basic method for a word study:

1. Read the passage slowly and carefully.
2. Write the key words, such as words that are repeated, significant, or unfamiliar to you.
3. Read two or three other translations to see how the same words are translated.
4. Look up words in a concordance, and list other Scripture passages where the same words appear.
5. List all the possible definitions of the words.
6. Choose the best terms or words that fit the particular context of the passage you are studying.
7. Look up the words in a Bible dictionary and compare your findings.

With each of these steps, the main goal is identifying the precise meaning of key words. The general concept involves cross-referencing Scripture passages. The following is an example of a word study.

Identifying Key Terms to Study

Studying the Passage

Verse 1. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. Paul used several important terms in this passage. You do not need to do a word study on every term, but a term such as “imitator” would be a good choice to study. What does it mean to “imitate” something?

Verse 2. walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. The words that stand out include: “walk,” “gave Himself up,” “offering,” “sacrifice,” and “fragrant aroma.” What does it mean to “walk in love”? Does this mean love isn’t just an emotion but something that involves action? What about “offering” and “sacrifice”? What does it mean that Christ gave Himself up? If possible, consult a different translation and identify any different terms and how they impact the meaning.

Assignment One Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment One** during the week can now report on the key terms they observed in Ephesians 4.

Cross-referencing and Defining Key terms

Studying the Passage

Verse 1. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. Looking more closely at the term “imitator,” the Greek term is sometimes translated as “follower” (KJV) or “follow . . . example” (NIV), but in most translations it is “imitator” (NASB, ESV). Is there any difference between being an “imitator” and a “follower”?

If you have a concordance, look up imitator and list all the places where the same term appears. In most cases, believers are called to be “imitators” of other believers (1 Corinthians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 1:6; Hebrews 6:12). This is slightly different from Ephesians 5:1–2, where Paul encourages believers to be imitators of God. In 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul connects the two ideas saying, “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.” Therefore, the word communicates the idea that believers should live in a way that represents of the character of God and follow the example of others who live this way.

Verse 2. Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us. Another key term to study is the verb “gave Himself up.” Most translations of Ephesians 5:2 say Christ “gave Himself up,” but this same word is often translated as “betray” as in “Judas Iscariot, the one who *betrayed* Him” (Matthew 10:4) or “deliver over/up” as in “He who did not spare His own Son, but *delivered Him over* for us all” (Romans 8:32).

The same term also appears as “handing over” or “giving over” in Ephesians 4:19 and Ephesians 5:25. These two uses are important because priority should be given to terms that appear in the same book or used by the same author. Thus, Christ willingly and sacrificially submitted Himself to die for the sake of His people.

Verse 2. an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma. Other terms such as “sacrifice”, “offering”, and “fragrant aroma” are found elsewhere in Scripture. Studying all these terms clarifies the meaning of key words in Ephesians 5:2 and the significance of Christ’s death as a substitutionary atonement for sin.

Assignment Two Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment Two** during the week can now share the concept of “offering” they found in the passages.

Assignment Three Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment Three** during the week can now share the concept of “fragrant aroma” they found in the passages.

Discussion Question

Why it is important to read the Bible closely and pay attention to every word of Scripture?

On Your Own

In the space below, try doing a word study on the term “present” and “sacrifice” in Romans 12:1. Look up Luke 2:22–24; Romans 6:13–19; Philippians 2:17; Philippians 4:18; and 1 Peter 2:5 to see how the same terms are used. If you have a printed or online concordance, try finding other terms and other passages that help explain the meaning of these terms in Romans 12:1.

Heart and Hands

8 minutes

Read again the **Real-Life Scenario** near the beginning of the lesson. Consider whether your answers have changed during the session.

Be silent for two or three minutes. Thank Jesus for His sacrifice and for the gospel. Adore Him for His glorious reign on the throne of heaven. Then ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you:

1. A way the Scriptures you studied today will change your heart for the glory of Christ.
2. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to stop doing something for the glory of Christ.
3. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to do something for the glory of Christ.

Write what the Spirit reveals to you below and then be ready to share what you have written with the group.

Since Last Week

5 minutes

Grace-Filled Accountability

5 minutes

Planning for Evangelism, Missions, and Service

5 minutes

Prayer

7 minutes

At Home: Nail It Down

This lesson has stressed the importance of doing word studies. Good students of the Bible must learn to read closely in order to understand God's Word. Studying key words in Scripture is all the more necessary, since Scripture was originally written in the languages of Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament). Every English version is a translation from these languages, and the translations don't always convey the same meaning. Careful word studies help students evaluate the terms and discover the best understanding of key words in any particular context.

When you study key words, be sure to have a concordance handy. For word studies, this tool will be your best friend. Keep it close by when you study Scripture, and use it regularly in your personal devotionals and Bible study.

Any time you are reading Scripture and want to know more about a particular word in the Bible, just follow the basic steps of a word study. Simply write down the key words in the verse. Then compare the way the word is used in other translations. Pull out your trusty concordance and find out where the same word appears elsewhere in Scripture. Note all the different senses and meanings of the terms and choose the best one that fits the context of the passage you are studying.

Looking up these terms up in a Bible dictionary is a good practice, but don't do this initially. Work through Scripture first on your own and then check with other resources. Always remember that the best interpreter of any word in Scripture is other Scriptures. Words don't always have the identical meaning in every passage in Scripture, but every use of a term sheds light on the same word that is used elsewhere.

Word studies are a great way to study the Bible and learn more about God's Word. Learn the process and apply it regularly!

Follow up Question

What are the basic steps for conducting a word study in the Bible?

The Making Disciples curriculum is a gift from Southwestern Seminary to those who, for the glory of the Father and in the power of the Spirit, will spend a lifetime embracing the full supremacy of the Son, responding to His kingly reign in all of life, inviting Christ to live His life through them, and joining Him in making disciples among all peoples.