# Preparing Bible Studies for International Students

*By Dr. Archie A. MacKinney*

### Some General Principles

**Assessment of students.** Most students are religious only in a cultural sense. Family, country and religion are tied together. To change religion is to betray family and perhaps country. But one's personal belief is in science and evolutionary progress, sometimes with Marxist overtones. In general international students are more like American students than they are different, although American student ties to religion and country are looser. The search for meaning, security, and self-worth are the same everywhere.

**Principles of approach to Bible study.** In the context of a loving, sincere, accepting group, preferably a dinner group, introduce the idea that international students should study an important literary piece which has greatly influenced literature and religion worldwide. You could point out that the Sermon on the Mount, the 10 Commandments, the chapter on love in I Corinthians 13 and the Psalms are worthy of the attention of any educated person.

Use the inductive approach. Questions and answers are better than lectures. We want to try to get the student to think.

Our task is to open the Scripture and read it on the level of a daily newspaper. No special knowledge is needed to understand. If the untrained reader cannot grasp the meaning of the text with some coaching, perhaps the material is too difficult to be studied in this format. The leader should be inconspicuous, learned in Scripture but reading the text as if for the first time, without reference to commentaries etc., thus putting himself on the level of the student and able to appreciate the student's insights.

The rationale is that God promises to bless His word. We trust Him to do what He has promised. Our task is to make the Word available to the students.

### Some Special Sensitivities

1. Hindus are affronted by the concept of sacrifice (taking life).
2. Muslims struggle with the Trinity. Is it really, Father, Mother, and Son?
3. Buddhists do not understand sin.
4. "God" needs to be defined for Hindus and Buddhists.
5. The Old Testament is common to Muslims, Jews and Christians. It is of interest to Hindus and Buddhists. People show more interest in creation than in Christ.
6. Muslims will not sit still if there is preaching or praying, but Bible study is acceptable.

**The choice of passage.** I was taught that Christ, His person, work and teaching are the first impression which the student should receive. Our experience is that the idea of a Savior is not meaningful to one who does not believe in God. The word Messiah was very meaningful to the Jewish people of Jesus' day, because they knew the Old Testament. The Buddhist, Hindu, Moslem and scientific materialist does not have this orientation. It is our impression that an Old Testament approach to Christ is the best way to make Jesus understandable to the student. Suggested agenda:

1. Who is God? Genesis 1
2. Who is man? Does God care about us? Psalm 139
3. What is sin? Genesis 2,3
4. What does God think of sin and what does He expect us to do about it? Lev. 4
5. What did God promise to do about sin? Isa. 53
6. What did Jesus teach about sin? Matt. 5
7. How did people react to Jesus? John 3,4,9 etc.

**Preparing the lesson.** Confine yourself to one passage as a rule. Write out a paraphrase of the passage in your own words. Make certain that you understand the meaning of every word, phrase, sentence and paragraph. State in one or two sentences the importance of the meaning of the passage. Know the important doctrinal content.

Write out a sequence of questions which carry the reader through the passage. Write out the answers you would expect. Is the question clear and reasonable? Would you be able to answer it? Does one question lead to another in logical fashion? Do your questions reach the conclusion that you wish to make?

Try your lesson out on someone. Avoid the direct "What do you think?" Instead use the indirect "What do Chinese people think?" or "How have you been taught?"

### Delivering the Lesson

1. Introduce everyone.
2. Preface your reading with a brief statement or questions such as: "In your culture, what is taught about where people go after they die?", to introduce John 11.
3. Give the page number for the text you are going to read, prefer-ably from the same edition of the Bible in each person's hand. Good News For Modern Man is our preference for Bible study.

**Read the passage.** Sometimes reading 1-3 verses each around the circle, or sometimes having one reader for the whole group is more appropriate.

Paraphrase the passage into your own words.

Ask for questions about words, phrases, or ideas that are strange. For example: What is a vine? What is a serpent? What is a Pharisee?

Ask for impressions of the passage. Do they like it? Is it upsetting or interesting?

Ask your questions. Make a summary statement. Do not close in prayer unless the situation demands it.

### Problems

**There is no response to your first question.** Rephrase the question; wait a few seconds; answer it casually yourself. If there is no response to the second question, invite someone you know to answer. Try a third question. You may have to prod another person to answer. If there is no answer to your third question, lecture through your material and then try your concluding questions. Sometimes you may wish to assign questions in advance of the discussion to little groups of 2-3 who can usually find an answer.

**A foreign student asks questions unrelated to the lesson**. Stop and try to answer the question if it is at all reasonable to do so. On occasion I have devoted the entire time to students’ questions. What they want to know may be more important than what I have to tell them. If someone wants to discuss a very difficult topic such as the Trinity or predestination, suggest another time. Even disruptive questions can be used. For example, Note this discussion of John 4:

Leader: Jesus talked about water to this woman. Why do you think He chose that symbol?

Student: Why do we have to fool around with symbols? Why not just get to the point?

Leader: What do you think the point of this discussion is?

Student: Here is an obviously immoral woman who needs help.

Leader: Why didn't Jesus just say "you're an immoral woman and you need help."

Student: I suppose she would have run away.

Leader: Precisely. We work with symbols because He used symbols to attract her interest. In this case water suggests thirst. How did this woman express her thirst?

**Americans monopolize the discussion**. Ask them ahead of time to be good listeners unless you cue them in. Recognize the internationals by eye contact and encourage them to contribute. If necessary, tactfully say "we must give others a chance" or "that doesn't sound quite right" or "we must confine ourselves to this passage."

**The foreign student wants to say what his religion teaches**. Encourage a brief statement. Ask others what their religion teaches on this question. Summarize what the passage says on the subject. If the student again interjects his religious views, let him have the last word. We are not out to win arguments. Do not compare prophets. Do not say "Christianity is better because"...Say what the passage says and let it go at that. If you feel bad because you couldn't get your point across, think how long Jesus worked with His disciples before they believed Him.

Remember that Bible study is a catalyst for one-to-one personal work, not a substitute for it. Remember that you are not obliged to give a "clear presentation of the Gospel" every time. Many times Jesus left His audience with a parable to puzzle over. He used the formula "born again" only once.

### A Lesson Outline.

**Introduction:** Our work at the University is intended to make us happy, well-adjusted and effective people, but the University does not give us a clear idea of how we should behave. Today we are going to look at one teaching on how we should behave. This is a sermon which Jesus taught and which has challenged the thinking of many people. It is rather long but most of it is quite clear.

*A. Matthew 5:1-48*

1. Verses 1-16

These verses are about happiness.

What makes a person happy? (Health, wealth and love.)

Then Jesus' idea of happiness is different from ours.

Do you see anything that all of the verses about happiness have in common? (They all suggest people who are seeking for God.)

Are people who are seeking for God happy people? (No. But they may become happy.)

2. Verses 17-20

What did Jesus mean by "fulfilling the Law?" (Making it rich with meaning.)

Who are the Scribes and Pharisees? (If you refer to the glossary you will find they are a very strict religious people.)

How could one be better than such people? (We probably can't be.)

Jesus now cites five laws and interprets each one with practical examples.

3. Verses 21-26

Not killing is the old standard of right behavior. What is the new standard?

(Not being angry, not insulting, not abusing and being reconciled to all.)

4. Verses 27-32

Not committing adultery is the old standard of right behavior. What is the new standard?

(Not lusting, not allowing any part of the body to cause us to sin, no divorce except for unchastity.)

5. Verses 33-37

Not swearing falsely is the old standard of right behavior. What is the new standard?

(Not swearing at all, saying only yes or no.)

6. Verses 38-43

Not retaliating against our enemies is the old standard. What is the new standard?

(Not resisting evil doers, going farther than you are asked to, giving freely.)

7. Verses 44-47

The old standard is that you should love your neighbor but it is alright to hate your enemy. What is the new standard?

(Love your enemy, pray for your persecutors.)

8. What is the summary of this passage? (Be perfect as God is perfect.)

*B. What is Jesus' view of the Old Testament Law?*

("not one jot or tittle shall be removed until all is fulfilled;" He did not come to destroy but to fulfill.)

1. What changes does He make in the Law? (He said it must be in your mind, not just in your action.)
2. What authority does He cite for the changes He makes? ("I say unto you.")
3. Who is the author of the Old Testament Law? (God.)
4. What does Jesus' Word indicate about His relationship to God? (He puts Himself on the same level as God.)
5. Can we keep the Law as Jesus describes it? (No.)
6. Can we enter the Kingdom by keeping the Law? Can we be perfect? (No.)
7. No one can enter the Kingdom of God by keeping the Law.

\*Comment: This is an abrupt conclusion, but it is most important that everyone, Christian, or pagan, realizes that we do not come to God on the basis of our good works, and that I think it is well to let them dwell on this truth until the next session.

**How this lesson worked out on one occasion.**

Dramatis Personae:

Mr. K: An articulate hostile Pakistani who claims to religion.

Mr. C: A Buddhist, Chinese mathematics students interested in Christianity.

Mr. B: An American visitor who is a Christian.

Mr. T: A Taiwanese music student.

Miss S: A Ceylonese woman law student with a Christian background.

Mrs. K: The American wife of Mr. K., who has been brought up in the Lutheran Church.

Miss Z: An East African literature teacher of Indian Muslim background

Mr. W: An American Christian international student worker.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God."

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

"Except your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of Scribes and Pharisees, you shall in no case enter the Kingdom of Heaven..."

"You heard that it was said, you shall not commit adultery, but I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has al-ready committed adultery with her in his heart."

"You must be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect."

Leader: What is your reaction to this passage? Do you like it?

Mr. C: It makes me feel uncomfortable; I don't think I can do those things.

Leader: It looks impossible not to think an angry thought. He has taken the Old Testament law and upgraded it beyond our capacity. Note the ways to be happy. Mr. T., what makes a person happy?

Mr. T: Prosperity, health and success.

Leader: That is a traditional Chinese viewpoint. Isn't it a contradiction to expect that the poor in spirit, the meek, the hungry and thirsty for righteousness are happy?

Miss Z: What is meek? Isn't that cowardly?

Mr. K: No, meek is courageous. The word means something like non-agressive--like Ghandi. But the part that distresses me is "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God." If I am not pure in heart I have no hope of seeing God. I don't even know what pure in heart means. I can't imagine such a thing--pure in heart.

Mr. B: Oh, I know what it means to be pure in heart! I am pure in heart.

Leader: Maybe you know in the abstract, because you know the way God thinks of you. But pure in heart in the sense that Mr. K--

Mr. B: But when God saves us He makes us pure in heart.

Leader: What we are trying to understand is how that might feel and it is very hard to describe. I agree with Mr. K.--it is almost beyond imagination.

Mr. C: I don't think we are supposed to take the passage literally. Does He really want me to cut off my hand or throw out my eye?

Leader: Do you really want to be thrown into Hell? (LAUGHTER!)

Mr. K: But he has a valid point. The whole passage is out of reach. What is the point of such a law? Such teachings can only frustrate you.

Leader: There are three purposes for the law; 1. to guide civil government; 2. to bring us to God; 3. to give the believer a standard for his life.

Mr. K: Western society has suffered from this law. In the East, we do not have such a law and there is no sense of sin. I think people are better off.

Leader: Why is the text here?

Mr. K: It moves one to despair. No one can be pure in heart.

Leader: He says that our righteousness must exceed the behavior of professional religionists if we are to enter the Kingdom of God. "Be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect." It looks as though the door into the Kingdom is closed.

Miss S: But Jesus gave Himself for us and opens the way.

Leader: How can that be?

Miss S: If we do the best we can, God will accept us. There has to be a way in.

Leader: Then He did not mean to close the door to our good works?

Miss S: How do you know that this passage is not taken out of context? Maybe if we had all the passages, the answer would be different.

Leader: We should not do this, but there are passages outside of this text that prove that our understanding of this passage is right. Please turn to page 344, Romans 3:20: "By the deeds of the law shall no one be justified, for by the law is the knowledge of sin." The law is not a saw to straighten out our lives, but a square that shows we are crooked.

Mr. K: Wait a minute. Down further on this page it says a man is justified by his faith in Jesus Christ.

Mr. W: The whole passage is important, "since all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, they are justified by His grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ."

Mr. K: In other words if I believe in Christ I can be right with God. I am strongly attracted... but then my natural skepticism asserts itself. Look at all the injustice done in the name of religion in the Middle Ages. Look at the temple priests in India exploiting the people. It is all an exploitation.

Leader: The transaction is made in your heart in your own room. There is no one to exploit you. It is between yourself and God.

Mr.K: I am strongly attracted ... but how do I know it isn't just another religious trick?

Leader: I have a feeling that I know now what "pure in heart" is. It is a child-like trust that says "God, I trust you--this once."

Mr. K: Children are not good. There is no advantage to being child-like.

Mrs. K: What about all the faithful people of other religions? Are they all lost? I can't buy that. There is good in every religion.

Leader: The great fallacy of all religions is "if I do my best, God will be pleased with me" That is true of Hinduism, Islam, liberal Protestantism and Catholicism.

Mr. K: I have to retain my skepticism.

Leader: Once in our life we have to say, "God I trust you. I believe what you say."

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