

Must We Always Keep It In Context?

One of the best pieces of Bible study advice is keep whatever you are studying in a particular passage in its context. But must we always keep it in context? The shocking answer is yes...and no.

Yes, we must keep everything we teach from any individual passage within the biblical context. If we make a point from a particular passage that goes against the biblical message in general, we are mishandling the particular passage.

Yes, we only fully understand a passage if we have first considered what the author's actual point was within the context. I get it. Paul's purpose in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 was not to teach we should worship God through vocal singing as opposed to instrumental accompaniment. If that is the only thing we ever do with those verses, we miss what God, through Paul, was really saying.

No, the only lesson from a particular statement, verse, or passage is not merely the author's main point in context. While we must do so with great care, we can often draw legitimate conclusions from a particular statement that were not the original author's main point in context (e.g. God authorizes singing as worship in **Ephesians 5:19** and **Colossians 3:16**, He doesn't authorize playing instruments).

Consider a pretty clear example. I most often hear **I Corinthians 6:9-11** cited to explain we should not prejudice someone based on their sins, but should share the gospel with them anyway. But that is not Paul's point. In context, this paragraph is the conclusion to Paul's teaching about taking brothers and sisters to law before the unrighteous. His point is that Christians are crazy to seek counsel on conflict resolution from those who are not inheriting the kingdom of God. As **Psalms 1:1** explains, the blessed don't walk in the counsel of the ungodly. We left that path by the washing, sanctification, and justification of the Lord Jesus Christ. Why would we now seek the counsel of those who are lingering on that unrighteous path? Paul's point, in context, is when Christians have conflict, as we inevitably will, don't resolve it based on advice from the unrighteous, but seek counsel from wise brothers and sisters in Christ.

Having recognized that Paul's point is actually about avoiding counsel from the unrighteous, does that mean we can never use this passage to claim we should share the gospel with anyone no matter what sins they are involved in? Of course it doesn't mean that. That is a perfectly legitimate and logical conclusion from the passage. After all, even though it is not Paul's point, he does demonstrate some of the Corinthians had been involved in all these sins, but they were changed by the gospel. It stands to reason we should not withhold the gospel from anyone just because they are involved in these sins. The gospel message has the power to save, wash, sanctify, and justify them as well.

Certainly we must keep any conclusions within the context of the Bible's general message and teaching. Certainly, we must never allow our logical conclusions to supplant the author's main point in context. Certainly we must take care that our conclusions really are based on sound judgment from the text. But, yes, we are allowed to draw biblically consistent messages from passages even if those messages are not the author's main point in the original context.