



The Topical Study

How to study the Bible for yourself

Defining a Topical Study

- A topical study involves two things:
 - First, you pick a subject and examining all that the Bible has to say about that subject.
 - Then you put together a comprehensive outline of what the Bible actually teaches on that subject.
- A topical study in most cases can be considered largely synonymous with a thematic study.
 - Some make a distinction between the two based upon the scope of the study.
 - For our purposes, we'll limit the scope according to our own purposes and identify it as a topical study in either case.

Topical Studies are Exhausting!

1. It requires the most initial effort to accumulate all the pertinent data.
2. It requires the most effort in the study process itself since you must handle every individual reference in its own context before you can relate it to your topical study.
3. It requires the most diligent and thoughtful effort when you seek to put together all you've learned into one cohesive outline since the scope is not limited to a single passage.

If it's that much work, why do it?

1. It gives you a comprehensive look at all the Bible says about a topic.
 - You get a balanced and fuller understanding of a subject this way.
 - You gain a greater appreciation of all the Bible has to say about your subject (sometimes there's a lot more on our subject in the Bible than we realize)!
2. It lets you study a subject you really want to know about—instead of looking at a passage that may or may not answer the specific question you have.
3. It facilitates sharing what you've learned more dynamically than a chapter or book study.
4. It brings variety into your personal study time, so that you look forward to getting back into book and chapter studies.

How To Do a Topical Study

- There is a basic 4 step process:
 - 1) Choose your topic
 - 2) Study your topic
 - 3) Arrange your topic
 - 4) Apply and share your topic
- Depending upon your choice of topic and exegetical prowess you may want to limit your scope.
- Regardless of scope, even a limited topical study can produce much fruitful insight and a more worshipful life.

Step 1: Choose Your Topic

- Pick your subject or topic and identify it with a single word.
- You can choose a general word for a subject (e.g., finances, family, marriage)
- You can choose a specific word for a sin, circumstance or character quality (e.g., immorality, lying, bitterness, complaining; suffering, singing; humility, love)

Make a List of Verses To Study

- Make a list of every verse that uses that word.
 - Use Bible s/w or a concordance
 - Keep in mind that there are version issues—KJV, NAU, NIV, ESV—they may not use the same words
- Be sure to use the Strong's Number(s) as a key if you're using only English versions.
 - Word Study Dictionaries are great for this!
 - Strong's Concordance will help with this
 - Key: There may be more occurrences of your word in the original language than you will readily find in English.

You Can Narrow the Scope!

- If you pick a word like 'love' and begin to build your list, you may find you have so many verses and Strong's numbers that you feel too overwhelmed to go any further!
- Narrow the scope to the Gospels, or the NT, or the Pentateuch, or Paul's letters, or even a single book like 1 John! Even a narrow scope will teach you much when studying the Bible.

Expand Your List by Adding Synonyms & Antonyms

- Use a Thesaurus, www.dictionary.com, or a *Word Study Dictionary* along with the Strong's numbers you've collected to add to your list of verses to study.
- Use your concordance or Bible s/w to expand your list with all these words and their references.
- Be sure to read and note the definitions for these words and their synonyms at this point as a mini word-study exercise.
- BTW, don't be surprised if even more words pop up while you're doing your word study.
- Finally, repeat the process using antonyms.

Round Out the List of Passages

- Make a list of character studies or biblical narratives you can think of that illustrate or inform the subject.
- Use a Topical Bible to see how many additional references you can find (also, check out the reference in the back of your MSB).
- Be sure to look for all synonyms and antonyms when you do this.

Remember, you can always limit the scope!

- If your study becomes overwhelming at this point—or, you want to break it into manageable pieces—just limit the scope and save all the lists for future use.
- Many ways you can limit the scope:
 - Just study 'love' in John's writings (Gospel, Epistles, Revelation)
 - Just study 'faith' in Romans or Paul's Epistles
 - Just study 'giving' (or tithing) in the OT or in the NT
- Save the list so you can go back and look at what you left out some day!

Step 2: Study Your Topic

- Put your list of verses/passages into an order of study.
- Group books and characters together
- Canonical order is usually best to follow
- Well known texts often are good to hit first or last—depending upon personal bias [e.g., me and MSB]

Look up each text and read it

- If it is pertinent to your topic, note it so as to return to it in detail in the next step.
 - You may need to read the paragraph or larger surrounding context to make this call in some cases
 - You should always check the XREFs in the margin if it is a pertinent passage for more verses to add to your list
- If it is not really related to the actual topic you're studying, exclude it and move on.
- When you finish reading through your full expanded list, you've accomplished two key goals:
 - You have a list of verses and passages that you need to study in detail for your topic.
 - You have a good first impression of the kinds of things the Bible has to say about your subject (you've primed the pump of your mind).

Examine Each Text in Detail

- Look in detail at every reference you've identified at the beginning of step 2 as pertinent to your study.
- Look at each one in its proper biblical context.
 - Author, audience and argument—etc...
 - Don't assume every verse is primarily about your topic!
- Determine the main point of this passage.
 - You may use other resources to gain answers to interpretive questions (e.g., BKC, MSB, EBC).
 - You may need to do a chapter study in some cases to properly handle a text.
 - Refer to your own notes from past studies when possible (this is why you should take sermon and personal study notes).
- Determine what this text contributes to your topic.

Make Note of Your Conclusions

- Record your findings by chap & verse
 - Write down what the point of this passage is, and what it states or implies about your topic.
 - A good Excel spreadsheet can be very helpful at this point
 - Make a table keyed to ref, xref, observations and insights
 - Or, use a legal pad method like I do
 - Organize your notes so they facilitate the synthesis process to follow
- Don't be afraid to discard a text at this point if it really doesn't apply to your topic
- Don't be afraid to add a verse or XREF to the list if you find another one you missed before.

Step 3: Arrange Your Topic

- At this point, you want to draw some conclusions and put together the fruit of all your labors into a coherent outline on your subject.
- This synthesis process involves 3 stages:
 - 1) Grouping texts based on findings
 - 2) Organizing the material into outline form
 - 3) Writing a concise definition of your subject

First, Group Texts by Findings

- Go through your notes and put all the texts that say the same thing about your subject into a group.
 - E.g., if you have 3 texts that say 'faith' is demonstrated by fruit or obedience, make a list of them on a separate page.
 - Include passages that illustrate that point in the same group (e.g., Zaccheus)
- Work through all your notes and passages. Group them all according to your conclusions, insights and lessons you've learned.

Then, Organize It into an Outline

- Work through this list several times until you've got it all into principle form.
- Don't be afraid to put several texts into an overflow bucket early on.
- Push to principlize your findings into a parallel teaching style outline.
 - If you've been through 'How To Preach' or 'How To Teach' materials, you'll have an idea what I'm talking about.
 - If not, think of it as a list of lessons or principles that summarize what the Bible says about your topic.

Write a Definition of Your Topic

- Now that you've done all this work, write out a clear and concise statement wherein you define your subject.
 - E.g., This is a list of 5 lessons about love that I've learned from the Gospels.
 - E.g., There are 3 keys to having assurance of salvation that I learned from John's Epistles.
 - E.g., I found 4 main rules that teach us about giving in the OT/or the Bible
- Make sure it basically encapsulates what you've put in your outline.
- Keep it simple enough that you can share it or refer to it in the future.

4. Apply and Share

- Apply what you've learned to your own life.
 - We'll go into more detail on this next week!
 - Did you learn any lessons about your topic?
 - Are there any specific changes you need to make based on what you've just learned?
 - Commit to an action plan!
- Share what you've learned with someone else.
 - Use the outline to share what you've learned with someone else.
 - Do it from memory and in tandem with your own life practices in parental contexts.

For Next Week

- I want you to do either a Character or Topical Study, and bring in all your notes and outline.
- I will show you how to derive personal application points from your work.
- If you want to share your study with me via email in advance, I'd love to use it as an example for the class next week!
- We should have the materials from class available for download on the website this week.

A Few Closing Tips

- Pick any topic you want, but don't be afraid to limit the scope at any point for larger subjects.
 - It's better to draw conclusions to a smaller study than to give up halfway through the process.
 - Gathering data isn't the same as processing it!
- Do a key word rather than general topic for your first one (e.g., 'giving' rather than 'finances').
- Keep your notes—even at the beginning—for future use.

Examples of Good Topical Studies by Other Authors

- Many books on Prayer, Finances, Parenting, Family, Marriage, etc...
- Most Biblical Counseling books and resources are the result of Topical studies
- John MacArthur
 - *The Gospel According to Jesus* was written this way!
 - Most of his books are put together this way.
- Frankly, any good topical sermon is based upon some form of this process—including my own messages!