

# A Topical Study

By Stephen Presley

## Pre-Session Assignments

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

### Assignment One

List at least three general topics you think are important for your Christian life, such as the Holy Spirit or obedience. Then, find at least two Scripture passages that discuss that topic and write what the Bible teaches. Prepare to share your work with the group.

### Assignment Two

Study Leviticus 16:31; Deuteronomy 8:2; Psalm 25:9; Isaiah 11:4; and Isaiah 61:1. Note how the topic of humility is addressed in each passage. Write the similarities and differences among the five passages. Prepare to share your work with the group.

### Assignment Three

Study Luke 1:52; 2 Corinthians 7:6; Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:12; and James 4:6. Note how the topic of humility is addressed in each passage. Write the similarities and differences among the five passages. Prepare to share your work with the group.

## Scripture to Memorize

*Do nothing from selfishness ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.* Philippians 2:3

## Session Goal

Consistent with God's Word and in the power of the Holy Spirit—by the end of this session, disciples will know the basic steps of a topical Bible study and will be able to apply that process to any number of issues.

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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](mailto:spresley@swbts.edu).

## It's in the Book

30 minutes

### Real-Life Scenario

Have you ever been asked your perspective as a Christian on important issues such as dating, sports, death or money? How did you respond? Were you able to refer to specific biblical passages and explain what God's Word says about that topic? Disciples who are living out their faith and engaging in evangelism are often questioned about important matters, and it's always good to be prepared with a biblical response. Learning how to do a topical Bible study prepares disciples to discover what the Bible says on any number of issues.

### What Is a Topical Study?

Topical studies involve surveying what the whole Bible teaches about a particular theme or concept. This includes doctrinal or moral issues, family or work-related issues, or any other issue important to our culture or life in Christ. A topical Bible study includes the following steps:

1. Choose a topic.
2. List all related terms.
3. Identify specific Bible passages that contain these terms.
4. Look up relevant passages and identify the main point as it relates to the key terms.
5. Create a set of subtopics and group passages according to subtopics.
6. Consult a good Bible dictionary or encyclopedia to compare your findings.
7. Explain how some or all of the subtopics relate to one another or apply to the Christian life.

In general, topical studies require cross-referencing Scripture passages in order to integrate all relevant biblical passages. The key to topical Bible studies is being thorough in your investigation and precise in your analysis. Don't just study passages that fit one side or perspective, but look up all relevant Scriptures. To illustrate the process, we can apply this method to the topic of humility in Philippians 2:3.

### Assignment One Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment One** during the week can now share a list of topics and passages that relate to that topic.

### Discussion Question

What are some of the most important topics for young people to study today?

### Choosing a Topic to Study

Read Philippians 2:3–5 out loud.

### Studying the Passage

**Verse 3. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.** Paul instructed disciples to live humbly and look out for the interests of others. Let's assume you are studying Philippians and want to know more about what the Bible teaches on the topic of humility. The first step is to list all the terms related to humility, such as *humble*, *gentle*, *meek*, *poor*, *modest*, and *afflicted*. Some of the words will be in the immediate context, but this list may grow as you continue your study.

## Identifying and Summarizing Topics

### Studying the Passage

Next, we need to look up all the Scripture passages related to the terms listed above. The example below only focuses on the words *humble* or *humility*, but remember that not all passages that discuss the *concept* of humility contain the word *humility*. Some use parallel terms or illustrations of the concept. Thus, a thorough search will involve a variety of concepts and topics related to the idea of humility.

Your printed concordance or Bible software program (such as [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com)) will help you find passages. Sometimes Bible translations use different English words for the same Greek and Hebrew term, so in some cases the word for “humble” is translated “meek” or “poor” or something similar.

**Verse 3. In humility count others more significant than yourselves.** The same word for “humble” that is found in Philippians 2:3 is used throughout Scripture. Here are several examples:

- Numbers 12:3: Moses is called humble.
- Matthew 11:29: The Lord is humble.
- James 1:9: The humble should glory in their position.
- 2 Corinthians 10:1: Christ and Paul are humble.
- Psalm 9:12: The Lord hears the cry of the humble.
- Romans 12:16: Associate with the humble.
- Proverbs 22:4: The humble are rewarded.

From this brief survey, we can see that God holds a special place for those who are humble. Many Scriptures contribute to the general topic of humility.

## Grouping Sub-topics and Applying the Topic

### Studying the Passage

The next step is to organize these passages into a few sub-topics that explain various features of the concept of humility in Scripture. Below are a few sub-topics:

1. Examples of humble people or events in Scripture
  - a. Moses (Numbers 12:3)
  - b. Christ (Matthew 11:29)
2. God’s response to the humble
  - a. Hears their cry (Psalm 9:12)
  - b. Comforts (2 Corinthians 10:1)
3. Characteristics and benefits of humility
  - a. Rewarded (Proverbs 22:4)
  - b. Revered (James 1:9)
4. Humility as a godly quality
  - a. Look to the interest of others (Philippians 2:3)
  - b. Associate with the humble (Romans 12:16)

### **Assignment Two Feedback**

The person who completed **Assignment Two** during the week can now share how several passages relate to the categories above.

### **Assignment Three Feedback**

The person who completed **Assignment Three** during the week can now share how several passages relate to the categories above.

The last step involves discovering how these sub-topics relate to one another and to the life of a disciple. First, Moses and Christ provide living examples of humility. Philippians 2:5 presents Christ as the ultimate example of humility. Other passages teach that God wants His people to express humility before Him. Several other texts explain the benefits of living humbly. Finally, some passages call disciples to live humbly before God and others. This is where Philippians 2:3–5 fits. Humility calls disciples to look out for the interests of others rather than themselves.

### **Discussion Questions**

What was the most challenging part of working through a topical study, and what is one thing you learned about humility by working through this process?

### **On Your Own**

Choose one of the fruits of the Spirit or the works of the flesh listed in Galatians 5:19–23. In the space below, briefly describe the steps of a topical study for one of these topics.

## **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**

A topical Bible study is a great way to discover what the Bible teaches on any given issue. Topical studies can address specific issues that are important to the people we see every day.

Topical studies involve a process of identifying, cross-referencing and grouping Scripture passages that all address the same issue. At times, this process can be challenging and overwhelming, especially if it is a large topic with lots of passages. The outcome is always worth the effort since you will have a solid grounding in the way God's Word addresses key issues.

Take the time to memorize the steps of topical Bible study:

1. Choose a topic.
2. List all related terms.
3. List all passages related to these terms.
4. Summarize the main point related to the topic.
5. Group passages into subheadings.
6. Consult others and compare findings.
7. Apply findings to the Christian life.

Try applying this method to another topic in which you have special interest.

The key to this method is learning to be thorough and precise at the same time. Don't just look up passages that fit one side of an issue, but study all relevant Scriptures. The more you use this Bible study method, the more skillful you will become at using it. This is a great way to study the Bible and learn what the Bible has to say about the important issues of our day.

### **Follow up Question**

*What are the seven steps of topical Bible study?*

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.