

How to study the Bible: Synthesis

We've spent the last four weeks focused on context, translation, commentaries, and search tools, and have used them primarily to examine details or parts of the scripture passage. This process of analyzing the parts of the passage can be very rewarding, building a richer understanding of each component.

However, just like taking apart an (old, wind-up mechanical) alarm clock to see what makes it tick, you are left with a pile of parts, each of which you can now see in detail -- but you don't have a working clock. It is only after you've reassembled all the parts properly that the clock can function again. It may run a bit fast or slow, but now that we understand all the parts **and** their functions and relationships we know how to adjust it so that it keeps proper time again.

The process of examining the component parts in detail I'll call *analysis*. Next we'll attempt to assemble a new understanding of the passage that includes the relationships of the parts to each other **and** how this passage as a whole relates to its context; this process I call *synthesis*. While these terms have more specific meanings in formal disciplines like philosophy, rhetoric, logic, chemistry, and other fields I believe their use in this way is appropriate to our task.

Let's not make the mistake of thinking that we are creating a “synthetic gospel” as in comparing synthetic fibers to the natural fibers in our fabrics. Our goal is not to create something new from the raw materials provided to us – unless we count “understanding” as new -- it is, rather, to ensure that we are properly interpreting the word of God. This will always be an imperfect process, but we must not allow that to keep us from constantly seeking to know Him more fully through the word He has given us.

We'll start by recalling the context of this passage. Who is writing the story, for what audience, and for what purpose? What are the circumstances of this event? Who is Jesus talking to?

Perhaps the most important question for us is this: who or what is Jesus describing in verses 3-10? Do any of the Beatitudes [3-10] describe personal characteristics over which an individual has little or no control? Do these verses include any commands?

Section	Statements	Commands	Questions
The Beatitudes (5:1-12)	12	1	0
Salt and Light (5:13-16)	5	1	1
Fulfillment of the Law and Prophets (5:17-20)	4	1	0
Anger and Murder (5:21-26)	4	3	0
Adultery (5:27-30)	3	2	0
Divorce (5:31-32)	2	0	0
Oaths (5:33-37)	2	3	0
Retaliation (5:38-42)	1	5	0
Love for Enemies (5:43-48)	1	2	4
Pure-hearted Giving (6:1-4)	3	3	0
Private Prayer (6:5-15)	2	5	0
Proper Fasting (6:16-18)	2	2	0
Lasting Treasure (6:19-24)	7	2	0
Do Not Worry (6:25-34)	3	6	5
Do Not Judge (7:1-6)	2	3	2
Ask, Seek, Knock (7:7-12)	2	2	2
The Narrow Gate (7:13-14)	1	1	0
A Tree and Its Fruit (7:15-20)	5	1	1
Judgment of Pretenders (7:21-23)	3	0	0
Hearing and Doing (7:24-29)	5	0	0
TOTALS	69	43	15

In the Beatitudes is Jesus teaching us that the Kingdom of Heaven will include some of each kind of person He describes (poor in spirit, those who mourn, etc.), OR is He teaching, rather, that every citizen of the Kingdom of heaven will have each (all) of those characteristics? Another way to ask this question is whether Jesus is describing the variety of individuals who are citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, or is He describing the personal traits and characteristics of (each of) the citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven?

Now we are prepared to answer the question we posed last week: If Jesus is describing (in the Beatitudes) the citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven does He actually say that each of them will (or should) have each of these “blessed attitudes”?

An important part of synthesis is connection: integrating what we've learned in this passage with our understanding of the immediate context, with the rest of scripture, and with our daily life. This is where the cross-reference tools of our study Bibles and Bible study websites can be especially helpful. Some of the commentaries and devotional guides can help us see connections to our daily lives; however, I strongly encourage you not to rely on them too much, you will gain the most benefit from your own careful prayerful study and reflection.

Next week: Colossians chapters 1, 2, and 3