

How to Read and Apply the Bible

Step 3: Application

Key Question: *How do I respond to the text?*

Note: Much of this lesson material comes from the book Living By the Book by Howard and William Hendricks. I commend this resource to you for further study.

The Value of Application

- If we practice observation and interpretation perfectly but fail to apply what Scripture teaches us, we've failed.
 - **James 1:22-25** *²²But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. ²⁴For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. ²⁵But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.*
- God's Word was given to us not just to be read, but to be applied – specifically to our growth in faith and sanctification.
 - **2 Timothy 3:16-17** *¹⁶All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*
 - **Ephesians 2:10** *¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*
- Not only do we work on applying God's Word, but it also works on us!
 - **Hebrews 4:12** *¹²For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*

Pitfalls of Application

- The first mistake we can make is to skip to application without first practicing proper interpretation (either by not doing interpretation at all, or doing bad interpretation).
 - **Hint:** *This is a great way to start a cult!*

- We can think that interpretation *is* application, and that we've checked the box by gaining an intellectual understanding of Scripture.
- We can assume that superficial external obedience to Scripture's commands is sufficient "application," while missing that even the point of the Law was heart change.
- We can suppose that if we have an emotional reaction to Scripture, then that counts for application.
- We can become "sanctification soloists" who may be great at personal discipline but skip Scripture's focus of application on the church and your neighbors.
- We can believe that "successfully" applying God's Word will earn righteousness, make God love us more, bring blessings showering down upon us, magically protect us from sin and suffering, or guarantee us the "good life."

Keys to Application

- "Interpretation is one, application is many."
 - This doesn't mean "application is whatever you want it to be."
 - Rather, that a passage may have several valid (though not equally important) applications.
- Is the text **descriptive** or **prescriptive**?
- Who was it for **then**, and who is it for **now**?
- Does the text ask me to **believe** or **do**?
- Is the principle of the text **required** or **recommended**?
- **It's dangerous to go alone!**

Descriptive or Prescriptive

- Ask yourself: is this passage describing **what was** or **what is**? Or is it describing **what should be**?
 - **1 Kings 11:3** ³*[Solomon] had 700 wives, who were princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart.*
 - **John 13:35** ³⁵*By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*
- Interpretative tools that are helpful here are **genre** (narrative is usually descriptive, exposition is often prescriptive), **context** (e.g., is this a command specific to the Old Covenant?), and **biblical theology** (viewing the passage in light of all Scripture).
 - Solomon had lots of wives, but this is narrative – and the immediate context even makes it clear how that worked out for him! God's whole Word is clear: he designed marriage for a single man and a single woman.

- Jesus is addressing his disciples specifically in narrative. That might seem to make this merely descriptive of a command just for the disciples. But the broader context of John's gospel and the New Testament show that this was Jesus handing down his commands to his fledgling church, which continue to be ours today!

Who Then or Who Now

- For passages that seem prescriptive, a helpful step in answering "Is this for **me now?**" is to answer "**Who** was it for **then?**"
 - **Leviticus 3:17** ¹⁷*It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations, in all your dwelling places, that you eat neither fat nor blood.*
 - **Romans 13:1** ¹*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.*
- This can be complicated. Sometimes the answer is "both" – it was for them then, *and* it's for us now (at least in some sense). To find out, look especially at **context** and **audience**.
 - **Context:** Where does this passage fall in redemptive history? Is it limited to the Old Covenant under Moses? Is it part of the New Covenant under Christ, who fulfilled the Law for us?
 - **Audience:** Is the original audience a single person (e.g., a king)? Or is it a group or category you belong to (e.g., "all mankind" or "the church")? Does the thrust of the passage seem specific to a certain people in time and place, or is it more universal?
- For some Old Testament passages, the New Testament helps us!
 - God declares in many Old Testament passages that certain foods are off-limits, but the context is within the Old Covenant ceremonial laws. The New Testament makes clear that these ceremonial or dietary laws no longer apply (Mark 7:19).
 - Paul's original audience is the church in Rome, who would sometimes suffer greatly under the rule of Caesar. But the intent here applies much more universally – to "every person!"

Believe, Be, and/or Do

- Broadly speaking, all application breaks down into three categories: **believe**, **be**, and **do**.
 - Right belief should fuel right being and right doing – these things are not opposed to each other, and often application involves all three.
 - **Believing** is trusting God's Word (his revelation and his promises) as true, apart from works. What promise or truth do you need to believe?

- **Being** is becoming that which we currently aren't, reflecting our union with Christ as we pursue holiness fueled by His grace. What should you "be" in response to the text?
- **Doing** is obeying God's Word (his commands and prohibitions) both in thought, word, and deed, in commission and omission. What do you need to do in light of the text?
- Start by determining whether the passage is **law** (or command) or **gospel** (or promise or good news). These are *not* contrary, but they have **different functions**.
 - **Law** *demand*s and *requires* of you. (It's not just the Law of Moses.) It shows you how holy God is and how unholy you are. It teaches you what holiness looks like, and condemns you for your sin. But it can't justify you or make you right with God. (See pretty much all of Galatians, esp. ch. 3.)
 - **Gospel** *gives* to you *freely*. It shows you what God has already done for you in Christ. It holds forth Jesus and proclaims how he is everything you need for salvation, sanctification, wisdom, and daily life. (See pretty much all of Romans, esp. ch. 4-5.)
- Discerning whether you're reading law or gospel is not always as easy as "Am I reading Leviticus or Matthew?" Jesus was the greatest teacher of the law, and also the greatest preacher of the gospel. Paul's epistles contain gospel (think doctrinal sections) and law (think practical sections).
 - **Matthew 19:16-17** ¹⁶And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" ¹⁷And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments."
 - **Matthew 11:28-30** ²⁸Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.
- **Context**, as always, is important, both in the literary and theological sense. **Biblical theology** can often be helpful: if a passage sounds like it's contradicting salvation by grace through faith, consider that it might be the law functioning as a tutor to point to the need for Christ. And most importantly, careful **consultation** is extremely helpful: ask trusted Christian friends, read commentaries, and ask the Holy Spirit for help!
 - The self-righteous rich young ruler starts with a question: What must I **do** to be saved? Jesus answers his question literally: Keep the law. Jesus presses the law on the man until he can't stand under the weight of it, but instead of crying out, "What must I do to be saved?" he walks away, in love with his possessions.
 - Elsewhere in many places like this one, Jesus preaches the gospel to sinners who know their condition: they labor and are heavy laden. They feel the weight of the law crushing them. Jesus freely offers to give them rest and give him his yoke.
- This distinction helps us faithfully strive to **do** the **law** from a position of rest as we **believe** the **gospel**. We avoid the dangers of works-righteousness, which is thinking that

our standing with God is based on our obedience. When we remember that our standing is instead secured by Christ's obedience on our behalf, we are set free to obey the call to love God and neighbor from a heart of assurance and joy.

- Remember these two important points about the law:
 - The law is not bad. (Cf. Psalm 119.) It teaches us our need for Christ, and after our salvation continues to teach us positively about holiness and negatively about our perpetual need for Jesus, our Advocate. If we begin to stray from the safety of the gospel, the law is there to chase us back!
 - Just because the law drives you to Christ doesn't mean you are therefore free from the call to obedience! Should we sin all the more that grace may abound? By no means! (Romans 6:1)

Required or Recommended

- We also need to discover the *force* of the application of passage. Is the application a required non-negotiable (e.g., believing in the divinity of Jesus, or being a part of a local church)? Or is the application a matter of wisdom where believers have room to disagree (e.g., whether to partake of alcohol)?
- A great metaphor to use when thinking through this point is the "triage" that takes place in hospitals and clinics.
 - **Primary** issues are a matter of life and death. These are issues like the divinity and humanity of Christ, his actual resurrection, the Trinity, and more. They divide orthodoxy and saving faith from heresy and false faith.
 - **Secondary** issues are serious and distinguish denominations. These are issues like the nature and practice of the ordinances/sacraments, the understanding of justification, ecclesiology (beliefs about the church), etc. They divide can orthodoxy from heterodoxy, but don't mean someone doesn't have saving faith.
 - **Tertiary** issues are matters of personal conviction. These are issues often of practical wisdom, like preferred styles of music or Bible translations. They, while not unimportant, should not divide anyone!
- There are plenty of various opinions as to what issues belong to which category, but it's most important to get the primary issues right.
 - **Galatians 5:4** *⁴You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.*
 - **Romans 14:5** *⁵One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.*
- Good theology is the best way to know what issues belong to which category. In general, primary issues are only those that Scripture teaches *must* be believed to be saved. Secondary issues are all other clear teachings of Scripture that aren't requisite to saving faith. Everything else – especially those things that aren't clear – are tertiary.

It's Dangerous to Go Alone!

- As dangerous as it is to practice interpretation alone, it's just as dangerous to practice application alone! Remember that the majority of imperatives in the New Testament have to do with "one another."
 - **Romans 12:10** ¹⁰*Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.*
 - **Galatians 6:2** ²*Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*
 - **Ephesians 4:32** ³²*Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*
 - **1 Thessalonians 5:11** ¹¹*Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.*
- Many people in history believed that the most important application you could practice was alone – they became monks.

A Method for Practical Application

- A common question and concern about application is how to apply Scripture in the form of habits. We often yearn not just for "theory" on application, but practical advice on how to "make it happen" in our own lives.
- Scripture gives us several truths that point to the method of ongoing growth:
 - 2 Corinthians 3:18 – Beholding Christ's glory is the way for His light to shine in us.
 - Romans 12:1-2 – Transformation comes from mind renewal & practice.
 - Ephesians 4:17-22 & Colossians 3:1-17 – Put on and Put off
- While it's important to remember that application is *not just about behavior change*, there are helpful strategies and ideas about building the habits we want to have and getting rid of ones we don't.
- Below is a summary of the process of growth that happens through application:

LEARN -> BELIEVE -> BE -> DO

What does the text say?

What does the text exhort me to believe?

Who should I be in light of this text?

What do I need to do in light of this text?

Practice: Romans 8:1-11

Preceding Context:

¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

⁶ For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

⁷ For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸ Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹ You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

Following Context: