

Lesson 10 - Applying the Biblical Text

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Welcome to week ten of our journey together in learning how to study the Bible, not just for the sake of knowledge, but so that we know more about God, know more about his revealed Word, and become more like him. Our task this week centers around that last goal. All the work you have done in making observations, asking questions, and answering those questions via interpreting the text really serve one purpose. Now that we have an answer and an understanding, what are you going to do about it? THAT is the task of application in the Observation - Interpretation - Application cycle of an inductive bible study.

There is a general way in which we can apply the Bible to our lives. We read it, pray about it, memorize it, and reflect on it. As you reflect on the passage, does that passage expose any shortcoming, i.e. sin, in your life? As you reflect on the passage, is there a specific area of change you wish to enact in your life? This method of applying Scripture to your life works well with passages like Proverbs 3:5-6 "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." (ESV) or Psalm 119:11 "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you." (ESV).

Those two passages state principles that are generic enough to allow for easy application to our lives. We must be cautious in approaching every passage in this same way. We inappropriately apply many of the Scripture memory verses we hold dear because we apply them out of context. One glaring example of this misapplication comes from *Philippians*, the book we are using to hone our study skills. How many times has, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13) been used in your life to provide some sort of generic encouragement when you have to do something difficult? Or how about Romans 8:28 which says, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those called according to his purpose,"? That verse is frequently offered up as comfort without any consideration of the qualification found in the phrase referring to those who love God and are called by him.

If we have spent nine weeks being very intentional about how we are studying the text of Scripture, why would we then take such a haphazard approach to applying it to our lives? Let's look at how to continue our Bible study by discussing how to apply it to our lives.

A Quick Review

Before we get into the particulars of applying the results of our Bible study to our lives, let's recap how we got to this point. We believe the Bible is the *inspired, infallible, literal* word of God and is thus *sufficient* for all things in faith and practice. By inspired and literal, we mean that God superintended the work of the authors, using their life experiences, to ensure that the words they chose were the ones he wanted. These words have a plain meaning that is conveyed by their grammatical construction and historical context. This view is called *plenary inspiration*. By infallible, we mean that Scripture is without error because God himself is perfect; therefore, so is his revelation of himself. Since we believe these three characteristics to be true — inspired, infallible, and literal — then anything we might question, need guidance about, whether it be of a “spiritual” nature or practical everyday matter, can be found in the pages of Scripture.

Such a view of Scripture leads to a definitive approach to interpreting and applying its truths. We do not approach the Bible as merely a collection of ethical truths, striving only to identify the moral lessons of a passage. While symbolism and metaphors abound in the Bible, we do not attempt to assign a typological or symbolic meaning to every passage. Certain passages deal with profound, sometimes mystical ideas and concepts, but we do not seek to uncover and force some deeper meaning on the text. Understanding the origin of the text, but attempting to recreate an unnecessary and often untrue backstory as to how the text came to be leads away from its literal meaning. Individually, we will notice different aspects of a text, and due to our circumstances at that time, God might reveal specific truths or applications to us at that moment. However, we do not use the hermeneutic of, “What does this text mean to you?”

We approach the important task of interpreting the Bible from a historical-grammatical perspective using an ordered process of observation, interpretation, and application. We believe the text of Scripture is written and organized in a specific manner so as to communicate meaning through its grammatical structures. Those structures include, but are not limited to, the specific words chosen, literary devices such as comparisons or cause and effect relationships, and the repetition of themes and ideas. Each book of the Bible was written to a specific group of people at a specific time in history for a specific purpose.

In the first six weeks of class, we concentrated our efforts on making observations about those words, structures, themes, and ideas. We asked questions about those observations, trying to be as exhaustive as possible with those questions. Formulating these questions made our subconscious thoughts about the text conscious, causing us to think about the text more deeply than we might otherwise. We began our observation process with the whole book, then we applied that process to a few paragraphs, and eventually did the same to an individual verse.

The repetition of those steps seemed like overkill in the moment. Once we finished, we were able to appreciate how that work enabled us to properly place each verse in its proper grammatical context. Then we began the work of interpretation.

The process of interpretation has its own set of steps. First, we identified a question that arose from our long list of observations. Using lexicons and dictionaries, we investigated the meaning and usage of specific terms in our text. Next, we examined the context of the verse to find the answer to our question. We examined the immediate surroundings of the verse, including the verse itself. Then we widened the circle and searched for the answer in the larger group of paragraphs to which the verse belonged. Finally, we used the whole book itself as a source for our answer. Along the way, we consulted our prior work on making observations to see how the various grammatical structures and repeated themes and ideas to see how they might inform us on the meaning of the verse.

We cannot forget the text also has a historical context. At this point in the interpretation process, you will find it helpful to consult other sources like commentaries, Bible encyclopedias and histories, and other theological works. These works will often explain religious, political, geographic, and other cultural details that make the context of the text and its original audience unique. Since we believe in the plenary inspiration of the text, we must use that context to inform our interpretation of the text. We must identify the greater principle at work in the text that we see demonstrated in a specific way for that cultural context.

These same sources that we consult for assistance in understanding the cultural context usually provide information regarding unique understandings that can only be understood via the grammar of the original language - Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic in some instances. Besides the linguistic insights, the sources also provide other scholarly and interpretive knowledge that can aid our understanding of the text. We take those scholarly insights, combine them with the historic context, the grammatical context, and the basic meanings of the words involved to discover the meaning of the text.

The Application Process

Knowing the meaning of the text is only useful if you are going to do something with it. Interpretation without application is a scholastic exercise without any meaningful purpose. Broadly speaking, the process of application has two steps — identify the overarching principle from the plain meaning of the text, and then determine the necessary action to take in response to that principle. Let's discuss what we mean by the *plain* meaning of the text. In order to do that, we must address a characteristic of the text we have yet to mention - genre.

Depending on who you consult, each of the sixty-six books of the Bible can be classified into one of anywhere from four to nine different genres. For our purposes here in the application stage of our inductive Bible study, we are going to group the genres into three broad categories, based on shared characteristics that have important implications for how we apply the meaning of the text. We will call our first category HISTORICAL literature and it will include genres such as historical narrative, biography, the epistles, and the law. This category would include Genesis through Esther in the Old Testament and all of the New Testament except for Revelation. Our second category is POETIC literature and includes genres like poetry, parables, and wisdom literature. The Old Testament books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs belong here. Our final category will be called PROPHETIC literature and includes Isaiah through Malachi in the Old Testament plus Revelation in the New Testament.

The above scheme is not perfect. Jesus utilized parables in his teachings, so clearly those portions of the Gospels would fit more neatly in the poetic category. However, remember why we are using these broader categories. The purpose for creating these categories is to provide guidance on getting to the plain meaning of the text.

In the interpretation process, we used commentaries and other sources to help us identify the cultural context of the text. That context heavily influences how the original audience interpreted that text. We should pay close attention to that context when applying scripture from the historical category. How much of the meaning of the text is dependent on the cultural context? If we strip the cultural context away, how does the meaning change?

A good example of this comes from 1 Corinthians 11. Paul addresses head coverings and hair length for men and women. Forgetting to account for the cultural context in this passage has led to all sorts of contemporary legalism. If done thoroughly, the cultural context was already factored in during the interpretation stage. Even so, it is important enough to consider it again when applying the text to ensure it is properly addressed.

Applying poetic literature is fairly straightforward. Again, any necessary precautions are usually taken in the interpretation stage. The use of poetic imagery and metaphors are familiar enough that we easily look past these to the plain meaning of the text. Perhaps the most obvious of these would come from the Song of Songs. In his efforts to properly romance his wife, I cannot think of any husband who would apply Song of Songs 1:9 and call his bride a horse.

Prophetic literature brings its own set of precautions. Cultural context is important here as well. The interpreter must determine if the given prophecy is general or specific? In other words, is it

a prophecy that applies to a certain group of people at a certain time in history, or is it a prophetic promise for everyone in any age? The prophecy may contain general truths about God on which all believers may rest, but that does not mean every detail therein is applicable to every believer. God certainly knows the plans he has for every person (Jeremiah 29:11), but there is no guarantee that every believer will receive a restored fortune (Jeremiah 29:14), or that our current figurative exile will last exactly seventy years (Jeremiah 29:10).

Consider these additional questions when trying to apply prophetic literature. Have the events already been fulfilled? If so, what was the outcome? Does that outcome provide a broader, general principle for everyone? Perhaps the greatest danger in applying prophetic literature is the tendency to force current world events onto Biblical prophecy. Be mindful of the times. Be more mindful of the meaning of the scripture.

What exactly, then, is the plain meaning of the text? The plain meaning is the message that would be understood by natural speakers of the language at the time the text was delivered. All the metaphors, poetic language, cultural allusions and contexts would have aided in the delivery of the plain meaning. They would not have been confused with the plain meaning. In other words, the plain meaning requires due diligence on our part to remove the cultural context from our interpretive work, especially since we are two thousand to thirty-five hundred years removed from the original cultures.

Now that you have the plain meaning, it must be applied to your life. The application may not be immediately obvious if the text does not provide a moral principle we recognize. Consider these questions as you pray and ask God to guide you in how to apply the meaning to your life. What does the text say about God? If the text is telling me something about God, how should I respond? What does the text say about me in relation to this message about God? When you are seeking to apply the message to your life, this is where those “what are the implications of ...” and “why” questions we asked during the observation stage come in. These questions get at the heart of application.

Potential Pitfalls and Helpful Guardrails

Once we remove the cultural context from the text, sometimes the plain meaning does not appear to have any direct application to our lives. We probably experience this most often when studying Old Testament texts, especially those which deal with some aspect of the civil or religious law of Israel. We resist the urge to ignore the context and we defeat the temptation to take a message or promise to a specific people from the past for our own. We want some type of application, so we begin to look for an allegorical meaning.

Most people use the word allegory synonymously with metaphor, analogy, or word picture. Here, we are using the word allegory to denote an approach to Biblical interpretation that seeks a deeper, more spiritual meaning than the plain meaning of the text. The clearest danger in this approach is the potential for eisegetical error. If we treat a text allegorically when it was not intended to be an allegory, then we begin to force our own meaning, or *read into*, the text instead of letting the text speak for itself.

For example, in the *Scofield Reference Bible*, C. I. Scofield interprets the sun, moon, and stars of Genesis 1:16 as Christ, the church, and the believers. One could certainly draw analogies from the moon reflecting the sun's light, therefore the church should reflect the light of Christ. As the stars are scattered about the sky, believers should carry their light into the world. Can we apply this interpretation to our lives? Certainly. Is this an egregious error that does violence to the text? Probably not. Then why bring it up?

Typologies and archetypes exist throughout the Bible. We certainly should see men like Joseph during the age of the patriarchs, Moses, and King David as foreshadows of the coming Christ. The parables of Jesus definitely require we apply a symbolic meaning to the elements of the text. We must guard ourselves against defaulting to always looking for the symbolic meaning instead of the literal, historical-grammatical approach. These principles can serve as guardrails against such an approach. Don't allegorize because the historical context is so foreign. Don't seek some "deeper meaning" because you don't see a moral or ethical principle. Don't force a symbolic meaning because it seems cool, insightful, or because one of your favorite preachers did it.

Another important set of guardrails can be found in having realistic expectations for the text we are trying to apply. These guardrails take us back to those first few weeks when you were cautioned about trying to generate an eight week sermon series from the study of one particular word. While some words might lead to such an exhaustive treatment, most do not. Theologically rich texts like Romans could take years to study because of its nature. In some chapters, individual words or short phrases stand alone with their immense measure of meaning. The Book of Judges consists of long narratives that are harder to subdivide. Be sure to have the proper perspective of what you are trying to accomplish when you seek to interpret and apply God's Word.

Let's Study the Bible

This week, look at some scripture passages and determine how you can apply them to your life. Normally, you would do this AFTER having done a series of observations, forming questions, and going through the interpretation process. Because of that, these more familiar passages have been chosen. Since you recently completed an interpretation of Philippians 2:12-13, that passage has been included.

For each passage below, a) identify the plain meaning of the text, b) determine the overarching principle that comes from that meaning, and c) describe how it can be applied to your life.

1. Philippians 2:12-13
2. Luke 10:25-37
3. Matthew 14:22-33
4. Galatians 5:16-25
5. 1 Samuel 17