

“How does this apply to me?”

by D.L. Deckard

One of the questions people often ask or think when they come to church and listen to a message is, “how does this apply to me?” This question of application is a good one. For, it reveals a desire to relate biblical teaching to everyday life. Without question, the Bible was intended by God to be applied to the daily lives his people. Unfortunately, however, behind this question is often a rather narrow understanding of what “application” *is*. When people ask the question, “how does this apply to me” it usually means “tell me what to do so that I can work through my problems and/or situations.” Put differently, the popular understanding of what application *is*, focuses on “doing” or “acting.” If a message fails to tell people what to “do” or “how to do it” people often walk away feeling like the message didn’t apply to them. I would like to suggest that this is both an overly narrow and incomplete view of application.

Application must include more than “telling people what to do” or “how to do it”. It must encompass every aspect of the human person – mind, heart and action. Sometimes the Bible doesn’t call us to “act” a certain way, but “think” a certain way. Paul’s first chapters of Romans are calculated to inform the human “mind” on the total depravity of the human heart and our absolute need for justification through faith in Christ. Here, Paul is not telling us what to do or how to do it, he’s telling us how to think about ourselves and God. Is not this equally to be understood as application? In fact, one could justifiably argue that applying God’s truth to our minds (i.e. how and what to think) is even a greater priority than “what to do” in light of the fact that right action is often an outgrowth of right thinking. Yet, so many fail to see or acknowledge this aspect of application. The result is an anemic grasp of the truth structures of the Gospel and the Scripture in general. To consider truth, meditate on it and allow it to transform us through the “renewing of our mind” is a laborious task that takes both discipline and work. People would rather forgo the messages applying God’s word to their minds and settle for the easy messages in the “here’s how to live” category. Biblical application must include not only “what to do” but “how and what to think.” We must consider the truth about the gospel as important as the moral and ethical implications of it. With this understanding, a message that focuses narrowly on the explanation of say, the doctrine of Justification (aimed at the mind), is just as “applicable” as one that gives “three steps to avoiding temptation.”

Not only do we as people created in the image of God *act* and *think*, but we also *feel*. The Bible is clear that we not only have a mind, but a heart, affections and emotions. Here too, the Bible prompts us to “feel” or be affected in certain ways (e.g. fear, joy, gladness, love etc.). Are not some portions of Scripture such as the revelation of God’s glory in Revelation 4 and 5 calculated to makes us “feel” certain things - to sense in our hearts the fear and awe of a God whose majesty is so brilliant that even the heavenly beings fall on their faces before him? Could it be that these chapters are more focused on us feeling awe than telling us what we should do? I would suggest so. I recognize that these categories of mind, action and heart overlap and influence one another. My point is simply to show that application can be and should be understood in a broader manner than we sometimes understand it to be. A message which intends to inspire awe in the heart is just as applicable as one that teaches us a truth for the mind or instructs us what to do in our action.

If we can broaden our understanding of application to include *doing*, *thinking* and *feeling*, we will see the full orbed intent and message of Scripture. Moreover, in so doing, we will be able to see application even in the highly theological portions of Scripture. May God give us the grace to apply every aspect of his word to every aspect of our lives.

Soli Deo Gloria

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