

INTRODUCTION

We come now to the fourth and final stage of Bible study--**application**. The first stage—*orientation*—focused on gaining an awareness of the world *around* the text (see Lesson 13, “The Practice of Bible Study, Pt 1”). The second stage—*observation*—focused on becoming acquainted with the details *in* the text (see Lesson 14, “The Practice of Bible Study, Pt 2”). The third stage—*interpretation*—focused on making sense of all the details in the text in order to understand its overall meaning (see Lesson 15, “The practice of Bible Study, Pt 3”).

STAGE 4: APPLICATION

Now the focus shifts to **application**. “Application” can be defined as “**the act of relating the meaning of the text to the life of the reader.**” Now that the student has arrived at a conclusion about the text’s meaning, he cannot stop there. He must turn his attention to his own context and relate that meaning to the circumstances of his own life—and the lives of others. He must answer the question, “**Now what?**”

Application:
the act of relating
the meaning of
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of the reader

Therefore, application involves *drawing the connection* between two points—(1) the objective, never-changing meaning of the biblical text; and (2) the subjective, ever-changing life of the reader. The meaning of the biblical text is singular and static. It has been delivered once-for-all. It will never change over time. It will always mean what it always meant. However, the recipients of this Word do change. Time passes and cultural contexts change from that of the original audience to those of the subsequent generations of readers that follow them. In fact, readers themselves are in constant change, changing in their own personal circumstances from the first time they study the text to the next time they study it, and so on. Yet regardless of the ever-changing status of the readers, the meaning of the text—as the Word of God—maintains its binding authority forever. As such, faithful application requires skill to make this connection, and this skill requires cultivation.

Ultimately, application is about **biblical authority**—the most influential issue related Scripture (see Lesson 7, “The Bible Is Authoritative”). Simply stated, “authority” is “the power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior” (Mirriam-Webster). In other words, authority is that which *binds the conscience*, and wherever we are in the Scriptures, there is always something that does this binding.

Consequently, where there is no faithful application of the text, there is a failure to acknowledge or submit to the authority of Scripture. But where sound application is practiced, the authority of God’s Word is received. As Joel Beeke and Paul Smalley stated, “The practical implications of the Bible’s authority become plain when we consider that our response to God’s Word is our response to God himself as he speaks to us” (*Reformed Systematic Theology*, 1.342).

Spheres of Application

Application of the biblical text should target three spheres, and should be considered in both a negative (something to *put off*) and a positive (something to *put on*) light in each:

- 1) Application aims first at **the intellect** as God’s Word calls for transformation in the realm of **beliefs**. For example, it calls upon the reader to renounce lies, errors, and inaccuracies (*put off*), and to believe and affirm what is true (*put on*).
- 2) Application aims then at **the will** as God’s Word calls for transformation in the realm of **behaviors**. For example, it calls upon the reader to resist temptation and put off sinful practices, and to walk in newness of life and put on Christlike qualities.
- 3) Application aims also at **the affections** as God’s Word calls for transformation in the realm of **passions**. For example, it calls upon the reader to disdain what is contrary to God (*put off*), and to yearn for God, His Word, and His will (*put on*).

Testimony for Application

The Bible itself does not assume application to be a given. Instead, it addresses its need head on. Some examples include:

- Deuteronomy 29:29; Joshua 1 :8; Ezra 7:10
- Matthew 7:24–27; Luke 8:21; 11:27–28; Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11; 2 Timothy 3:16–17; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; Hebrews 4:12; James 1:22–25

Neglect of Application

Yet, despite Scripture’s clarity on the necessity of application, appropriation of the meaning of the biblical text to our own lives is often inadequate, if not neglected altogether. The common reasons include:

- *We confuse interpretation with application.* Because we have already been busy with the Bible in interpretation, we think the work ends there.
- *We are content with superficial change.* We dedicate little time to self-examination, failing to recognize and appropriate the full extent of the text’s meaning in our lives.
- *We would rather be ruined than change.* We avoid that which convicts and go to great lengths to justify and protect old habits.
- *We claim the Bible is too hard to understand.* We justify inaction by claiming that the Bible’s “ambiguities” prevent us from taking action.

How can one engage in this challenging process of application? Five steps are explained below:

FIVE STEPS OF APPLICATION
1. Begin with Sound Interpretation
2. Distinguish Descriptive from Prescriptive
3. Identify the Theological Principle
4. Search for the Formative Pattern
5. Heed the Whole of Scripture

STEP 1: Begin with Sound Interpretation

1. Begin with sound interpretation.

PRINCIPLE: Application is only as sound as the interpretation that has undergirded it.

Contrary to common assumption, if a text has been misinterpreted, no amount of sincerity in obedience will compensate for the errant interpretation.

Faithful application of an error will not make it true. Rather, sound interpretation is the only option that allows for faithful, God-pleasing obedience. But if one’s understanding of the meaning of the text is incorrect, and he then applies that error to life, the outcome of his application will be a form of *legalism*—a binding of the conscience to practices and attitudes that are not intended by God.

J. I. Packer sums up well what is at stake: “Scripture can rule us only so far as it is understood, and it is understood only so far as it is properly interpreted. A misinterpreted Bible is a misunderstood Bible, which will lead us out of God’s way rather than in it. Interpretation must be right if biblical authority is to be real in our lives and in our churches” (“Give Me Understanding,” 104).

This first step reminds the interpreter to regularly evaluate his practice of Bible study (see Lessons 13–15, “The Practice of Bible Study, Parts 1–3”).

STEP 2: Distinguish Descriptive from Prescriptive

2. Distinguish descriptive from prescriptive.

PRINCIPLE: Every biblical text is authoritative and applicable—but not in the same way. The difference often comes down to the distinction between what is descriptive and what is prescriptive.

The responsibility here is not merely to recognize the difference between *narrative texts* (historical reporting) and *didactic/exhortational texts* (instruction). That is certainly a part of it. Rather, the responsibility here is to recognize the difference between *descriptive didactic/exhortational texts* and *prescriptive didactic/exhortational texts*. What is the difference?

- **Descriptive texts** are those portions of Scripture which contain teachings or instructions that are limited in their direct application to a specific historical situation or audience.

- **Prescriptive texts** are those portions of Scripture which contain teachings or exhortations which extend in their direct application to all people universally.

Indeed, every part of Scripture has authority and should be assumed as universal in application (see Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:11; 2 Tim 3:16–17). But Scripture itself can limit *how* these didactic or exhortational texts are to be applied. How does Scripture do this?

- The immediate context may limit the *recipients* of the instruction (see Titus 2:2–10 and consider the specific, demographic-related instructions given to “older men,” “older women,” etc.).
- The immediate context may limit the *duration* of the application (the text may indicate a specific non-repeatable or non-moral circumstance that elicited the command; see 2 Tim 4:13 and Paul’s command to “bring the cloak”).
- The direct applicability of the instruction may be limited by the specificity of the culture (see John 13:5–14 and the practice of foot-washing; it was the culture of the ancient Mediterranean world that required feet to be washed before lying down for a corporate meal).
- Subsequent revelation may annul the *nature* of the application (see Acts 10:13–15 and the Lord’s abrogation of the Mosaic Law, specifically with respect to food laws).

STEP 3:
Identify the
Theological
Principle

3. Identify the theological principle.

PRINCIPLE: The conscience can be bound only in response to transcendent truth. An application of a text can never be arbitrary but must always be traceable to this transcendent truth.

The New Testament letters provide helpful paradigms for tracing this connection between a practical application and a transcendent, theological truth. For example, consider 1 Thessalonians 4:3–8. In it, Paul provides his original audience—the Thessalonian believers—the whole equation of what is involved. First, he begins in v. 3a with the *instruction*: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification.” That exhortation now needs to be *practically applied*, which Paul does for the Thessalonians in vv. 4–6a in three specific ways (see v. 3a, vv. 4–5, and v. 6a). Then Paul ends by providing a trinitarian theological principle that undergirds both the instruction and its application (vv. 6b–8).

By seeing Paul do this “in real time” for the Thessalonians helps us recognize how to do it in our day. Of importance here is the conscious effort needed with each of our applications to connect them directly to a transcendent theological principle. If we cannot explain how our application “works out” this theological truth, then we have more work to do.

STEP 4:
Search for the
Formative
Pattern

4. Search for the formative pattern.

PRINCIPLE: Applications for life must be drawn not only from direct commands or instruction, but also from narratives. These applications must be drawn discerningly—according to patterns.

This principle is specifically related to our application of narrative texts. Narrative texts provide us with more than just historical facts. In fact, narrative is a subtle yet effective way of *forming* beliefs and behaviors. Thus, whereas we can speak of didactic and exhortational texts as being either *descriptive* or *prescriptive* in nature, we can speak of narratives—and poetry and prophecy—as being *formative* in nature.

What are we looking for? Repeated similar actions in the lives of the narrative characters and repeated affirmative assessments provided by God’s spokesmen. David Doriani provides a helpful summary: “Where a series of acts by the faithful create a pattern, and God or the narrator approves the pattern, it directs believers, even if no law spells out the lesson” (David Doriani, *Four Views of Moving Beyond the Bible*, 89). The opposite is also true. When we read of only an isolated action within a narrative it doesn’t establish a formative pattern. Or, when we read of repeated similar actions produced by the ungodly and given negative assessments, then these features become concrete examples of what *not* to imitate—what to *put off*—in everyday life. As Doriani again states, “acts that are isolated or disapproved cannot have normative value” (89).

STEP 5:
Heed the
Whole of
Scripture

5. Heed the whole of Scripture.

PRINCIPLE: The Bible is the product of progressive revelation. Throughout the stages of redemption, God as Lawgiver can and does change the way His Word is to be applied.

Most notably, we see this with respect to the applicability of the Mosaic Law. Its *meaning* has not changed; the Law's contents always *mean* what they originally *meant*. However, the way in which that meaning is related to the lives of the readers *has* changed. It has changed from how it was applied to ancient Israel to how it is applied today in the church (for example, see Romans 7:1–6).

With this in mind, in the drawing of applications we are always to consider subsequent revelation to determine if the nature of the applicability of the text we are studying has been changed by God. If so, how? Yet even if it has not been changed, we still must consider whether the specific applications we have drawn may conflict with other teachings of Scripture. For example, a student could draw from his study of Hebrews 5:12 the application that all Christians should be involved in formal teaching ("you ought to be teachers"). Yet a broad survey of Scripture on the topic would lead the student to James 3:1, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment." These two passages are not contradictory, but correct applications of Hebrews 5:12 must be made in light of what God has said elsewhere about *teaching*.

Summary
Questions for
Application

In conclusion, the list of questions below serves as a helpful summary guide for acknowledging the authority of the Bible and drawing the connection between the meaning of the biblical text and the subjective context of your own life (adapted from Brian Shealy, "Redrawing the Line between Hermeneutics and Application," 103):

- Is there a truth to believe about God or some other doctrine?
- Is there a command to obey?
- Is there a promise to claim or a warning to heed?
- Is there an example to imitate or to avoid?
- Is there an error in thinking or behavior to resist or renounce?
- Is there a condition to meet?
- Is there a principle to follow for personal guidance?
- Is there wisdom to shape thinking or lifestyle?
- Is there a prayer to pattern?
- Is there an obligation owed?
- Is there something to give thanks for?

DISCUSSION
QUESTIONS

Discuss these questions in your small group:

1. In your own words, explain what *application* is in the process of Bible study.
2. Why is *application* connected so closely with the doctrine of Scripture's *authority*?
3. What are the three general *spheres* of life that application addresses? What are the negative (*put off*) and positive (*put on*) goals of application in each of these spheres?
4. What are four reasons why application is neglected in Bible study? Which one is more characteristic of you? Can you add any additional reasons for why application is neglected by students of Scripture?
5. List and explain the five steps for applying the meaning of a text. Come up with one illustration for each of these steps.

FURTHER
STUDY

For further study this week:

1. Memorize James 1:22–25.
2. Write the "summary questions for application" on an index card to use as a bookmark in your reading of Scripture. Or write these questions on the inside front or back cover of the Bible that you use for reading and study—to guide you in the process of applying the text.
3. Listen to the sermon by Tom Pennington, entitled "Bible Study for Every Christian (Part 6): Evaluation and Application," available here: [Bible Study for Every Christian \(Part 6\): Evaluation and Application | Countryside Bible Church](#).

Audio, video, and handouts for this session: www.gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: May 14, "Evening of Prayer"