

APPLICATION: THE GOAL OF BIBLE STUDY

PRINCIPLES OF APPLICATION

THE GOAL OF APPLICATION

As we immerse ourselves in Scripture, our goal is to develop within ourselves the mind and heart of God. We want to be able to think and respond to every situation the way God would. As we renew our minds with Scripture, being careful to put its teachings into practice, we are transformed from spiritual caterpillars to beautiful butterflies that reflect the grace and glory of Jesus Christ.

THE 3 STEPS OF APPLICATION

STEP 1: UNDERSTANDING THE ORIGINAL SITUATION

1) God's Word is Timely

He spoke to specific situations, problems and questions. God becomes personally involved in peoples' lives in the Bible. He doesn't offer pious platitudes; He speaks directly to their needs in ways appropriate to their situations. This is good because we are given concrete examples rather than abstract. But the concrete nature of Scripture creates problems. Our situations, problems and questions are not always directly related to those of the Bible. Therefore, God's word to them does not always seem immediately relevant to us.

2) Timely, Yet Timeless

Fortunately, Scripture is not only timely but timeless. Just as God spoke to the original audience, so he still speaks to us through the pages of Scripture. Because we share a common humanity with the people of the Bible, we discover a universal dimension in the problems they faced and the solutions God gave them. Our job is to discover how to apply those passages which seem outdated and irrelevant, which are so timely that they appear to have lost their timeless dimension, and how to apply those parts of Scripture that were written to questions, needs and problems we no longer face.

3) Becoming a Time Traveler: Crossing the Barriers

Crossing the Time Barrier

We often lack important information regarding the historical context in which the events of the Bible took place. Unless we understand this, we may hear what the author is saying, but we don't know why he is saying it.

Crossing the Cultural Barrier

The events of the Bible took place in many different cultures: Egyptian, Canaanite, Babylonian, Jewish, Greek and Roman, to name a few. It is not uncommon, therefore, to read about customs or beliefs that seem strange to us since they are so far removed from 21st century culture.

Crossing the Geographical Barrier

As we learn about biblical geography, many Bible passages take on new meaning. There are several ways to become familiar with biblical geography. Many Bibles include maps for the reader to consult. A good Bible atlas or a Bible dictionary can also supply valuable information about unfamiliar places.

Crossing the Reading Barrier

Our success in understanding the Bible will depend on how skillful we are at reading. One aspect, therefore, of learning how to study the Bible focuses on acquiring reading skills – the kind of skills that will help us whether we are reading the Bible, a novel, a magazine, or a newspaper. Some guidelines:

- Identify the Type of Literature
- Get an overview of the book
- Study the book passage by passage
- Be sensitive to the mood of the book

STEP 2: FINDING TIMELESS TRUTHS

Learning to generalize is one of the most important steps in applying the Bible. When, on the surface, a passage seems to have little application to our situation today; we need to look beneath the surface for a general principle.

Building from Interpretation

If you took the time to understand the situation of the Original Reader and attempted to cross the time, cultural, geographical and reading barriers, a general principle (or timeless truth) should be obvious by the time you reach the end of interpretation. In interpretation you will come to see God's character revealed in how He related to specific people and how He called them to act when facing particular situations. Once you see this, you will recognize the timeless elements of the ways God acts, His character, who His people are and how He expects them to act. When you see these things, by stripping off the historical setting (geography, culture, time) they can be re-written as general principles.

Levels of Application

The Bible contains many levels of application. These levels are like a pyramid, with a few commands at the pinnacle and all the others at various levels between the pinnacle and the base. The principles at the top of the pyramid are more general and abstract. The commands nearer to the base of the pyramid are more specific, detailed and concrete. The commands can seem pointless or obscure until we move up to the higher levels on the pyramid to discover the principles or reasons for them (e.g. Deut. 22:8). Conversely, the principles near the top of the pyramid often seem vague and abstract until they are fleshed out by the more concrete principles near the base (e.g. Rom. 12:9). If we realize every passage is part of the larger biblical pyramid with its various levels, applying the Bible becomes much easier. If a passage appears too specific to apply to our situation, we simply move up a level, looking for a general principle to apply.

Level 1: The Most General

Level 2: More General

Level 3: The Most Specific

3 Important Questions to Ask When Finding General Principles

- 1) Question 1: Does the author state a general principle?
- 2) Question 2: Why was this specific command/instruction given?
- 3) Question 3: Does the broader context reveal a general principle?

Principles vs. Proof-texts

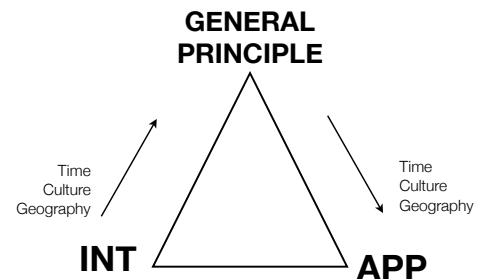
Finding general principles in Scripture is not the same as looking for proof-texts. Neither is attempting to tie up the truths of Scripture into neat propositional packages. Rather, we look beyond the specific commands, examples and promises in order to seek the mind and heart of God. We want to grasp not only what God said (although that is extremely important) but also why he said it. Our passion is to develop a godly mindset, a worldview that is shaped by the broad scope of Scripture.

STEP 3: APPLYING GENERAL PRINCIPLES TODAY

Many Christians don't take the time to reflect on how a principle might apply to the situations they face (problem #1). Others make the opposite mistake of applying a principle to situations for which they were never intended (problem #2).

Problem #1: Don't Stop At a 'Fridge Magnet' Application

Leaving your application at a general principle is like having a fridge magnet that says "God is Love" (general principle), which is true, but not necessarily helpful in how to practically respond to particular situations like dealing with a difficult co-worker, caring for an elderly parent or making life-decisions. Remember how we "stripped" the interpretation of its historical background to find the general principle? Well, to get to a practical application now we want to re-dress the general principle in the time, culture and geography of the 21st century. Taking the general principle and asking how it could be or would be expressed in various aspects of our lives, the church and society.



Problem #2: Determining the Situation to Apply a General Principle

The following guidelines can be used to help in determining if a principle in Scripture should be applied to particular situation:

1) APPLY A PRINCIPLE TO AN IDENTICAL SITUATION:

AS WE READ THE BIBLE THERE WILL BE TIMES WHEN THE SITUATION FACED BY THE ORIGINAL READER IS IDENTICAL TO OUR OWN.

APPLYING A PRINCIPLE TO A COMPARABLE SITUATION:

How can we know if our situation is truly comparable to one in Scripture?

First we must identify the key elements which are common to both the original situation and the principle we wish to apply.

Then we must determine whether our situation contains each of the key elements.

2) APPLYING A PRINCIPLE TO A DIFFERENT SITUATION

A contemporary situation must always be comparable to the original situation in one respect: both must share the same key elements found in the general principle. When we are looking for contemporary situations that are comparable to those in Scripture, we only need to be concerned about the key elements, not the superficial resemblance, or lack thereof, between our situation and the original one.

The Importance of Meditation

Application begins on our knees. We must ask the Lord to reveal those areas of our lives that need to be transformed by His Word and His Spirit. This can happen through effective meditation which must be done both thoughtfully and prayerfully.

Asking the Broader Questions

Unfortunately, many of us think only about our personal lives and in so doing blunt the full impact of Scripture. When you discover a biblical principle, be sure to ask the broader questions as well. How might it affect your church or community? Does it have any ethical or social implications? What about economic or political implications?

SPECIFIC TYPES OF APPLICATION

APPLYING BIBLICAL COMMANDS

OLD TESTAMENT COMMANDS

Rightly or wrongly, we often assume that some Old Testament commandments no longer apply while others, we feel certain, are valid for today. To properly determine which are valid we need to understand some basic facts about the Old Testament:

First, the Old Testament contains over 600 different commands. Most are found in the Pentateuch.

Second, the Old Testament is the record of God's covenant with Israel.

Some Guidelines for Applying Old Testament Commands:

- 1) Is the command restated in the New Testament?
- 2) Is the command revoked in the New Testament?
- 3) What is the principle behind the Old Testament command?

Although we are no longer under the Old Covenant, we need to remember that the laws of the Old Covenant reflect God's character. Therefore, the principles behind these laws should still be valid, though some specific expressions of the laws may be obsolete.

NEW TESTAMENT COMMANDS

Applying New Testament commands is simply a matter of following the guidelines already discussed. First we need to understand the original situation. Then we need to determine whether the situation is identical or comparable to today.

Getting to Specifics:

For many New Testament commands we don't need to find general principles behind specific situations. Rather, we need to find specific situations to go with the general principles. For example: "Love one another with brotherly affection" (Rom 12:10). When the commands are so general that they become abstract, we need to move down the pyramid, considering everyday situations faced in our time, culture and geography. We need to think creatively about ways in which they might apply today.

APPLYING BIBLICAL EXAMPLES

Clearly there are many excellent examples in the Bible. The difficulty however is knowing which examples we are to follow and which we should avoid. The method we use for applying a biblical example will depend on what kind of information the author gives you about the example.

a) Explicit Examples

The biblical author tells us explicitly if a person or group is a good or bad example.

b) Implicit Examples

The example does not include an explicit statement about whether the actions are right or wrong, but the author gives implicit approval or disapproval of what is done.

c) Other Types of Examples

Some biblical examples contain neither an explicit or implicit evaluation of a person's actions. In such cases we need to rely on truths or principles taught elsewhere in Scripture. Biblical authors expect us to have a basic knowledge of God's Word. In the Old Testament, it is assumed that the reader is familiar with the Law. In the New Testament, we are expected to know something about Christian theology and ethics. These assumptions by the writers often explain why they don't comment on a person's actions. They expect us to know enough to draw our own conclusions.

APPLYING BIBLICAL PROMISES

OLD OR NEW COVENANT?

Because we are no longer under the Old Covenant, we cannot assume the promises of that covenant directly apply to us. In fact, most do not. Such promises are usually associated with the blessings God promised the people of Israel if they obeyed His Law.

PROMISES VS. PRINCIPLES

A principle is not the same as a promise. A principle is usually based on who God is – God never changes; he is the same in both Old and New Covenants. A promise is based on what God has said he would do or not do, and both the conditions and recipients of His promise have at times changed greatly from the Old to New Covenant.

TO WHOM IS THE PROMISE GIVEN?

Before applying a biblical promise, we must identify the person or group to whom the promise was originally given. Most prophetic books were written directly to Israel and Judah. We cannot ignore the original audience and historical context of these books without serious danger of misapplying what we read.

3 Categories of Promises directly intended for us:

- 1) Promises that are universal in scope
- 2) Promises given to the Church
- 3) Promises given to other groups to which we belong

CONDITIONAL OR UNCONDITIONAL

Once we conclude that a promise applies to us, we must also ask whether its fulfillment is dependent in any way on our actions or attitudes.

IS THE PROMISE QUALIFIED BY OTHER PARTS OF SCRIPTURE?

PROVERBS VS. PROMISES

In spite of appearance, most proverbs are not promises. They are wise sayings, principles that are generally true of life. Those who follow the advice given in Proverbs will have wisdom for dealing with the practical areas of life.

THE LIMITS OF APPLICATION

GOING BEYOND WHAT GOD HAS REVEALED

It is dangerous to be dogmatic about what Scripture has not revealed.

ISSUES NOT ADDRESSED IN SCRIPTURE

As we look at God's response to issues that are covered in Scripture, we will develop spiritual sensitivity to those issues which are not covered. Because the Lord has given us His Word and His Spirit, this need not be idle speculation or groping in the dark.

APPLICATIONS THE AUTHOR NEVER INTENDED

If an application does not arise out the divine and human author's intent, then it doesn't carry the authority of God's Word, even though it may be helpful and insightful.

APPLICATIONS BASED ON A FAULTY INTERPRETATION OR LOGIC

Information taken from Taking the Guesswork out of Applying the Bible by Jack Kuhatschek. IVP

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