

Applying the Bible

by Jerry A. Collins

- *What is the value of application?*
- *How do we apply a passage?*
- *What do we do with our applications?*
- *Can a passage have more than one application?*

There is a basic three-step approach to studying the Bible:

- (1) **Observation** focuses on the question, What does it say? Assuming the role of investigator, no clue or detail is trivial while observing the text.
- (2) **Interpretation** deals with the question, What does it mean? Our quest is to comprehend the author's meaning.
- (3) **Application** answers the question, What must I do? We determine to understand the Bible so that our lives may be transformed by it.

This brochure will explain the step of **application** in this three-step approach. These three steps stand alone and may overlap.

James 1:22 says, *But prove yourselves doers of the Word and not merely hearers, who delude themselves.* James is saying, when we listen to God's Word, we must become a doer of the word every time we hear it. We are warned that when we only observe and interpret and do not apply, we are deluding, cheating, or deceiving ourselves into believing that listening is as good as obeying.

For example, we listen to messages at church services and hear lessons on the radio every week about the sanctity of marriage, yet the divorce rate among Christians is 1% higher than society in general [*The Grand Rapid Press*, Saturday, February 15, 1997, Section B2 quoting the Barna Research Group (a California-based marketing and research group that specializes in religion)].

In Philippians 2:12-13 we read, *work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.* We are to "work out" in our daily lives what God has worked in us by His Spirit. The will and the desire to apply God's Word is supernatural. Yet, God does not work apart from us. We need a passion to live the truth of God not just to hear it. So, we become partners with God to put into practice His truth in our lives.

Definition

Application of the Bible is the process of transforming ourselves by conforming to what we observe and interpret in Scripture, so that our actions and attitudes manifests the character of God.

Application is transformation

The application process includes asking questions and formulating principles which actually become part of our lives.

WARNING! Don't make the common mistake of applying passages that have not been observed and interpreted.

Application Questions

Is there a promise to claim?

2 Chronicles 7:14 says, *and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land.*

Observation: God's Word is filled with promises but not all promises are given to us. Some promises God made are to certain individuals or groups of people; the promise in this passage is made to the nation of Israel.

Interpretation: This is not a promise made to the U.S. or any other nation or individual.

Application: Therefore, there is no promise here for us to claim. Yet we can apply the passage by humbling ourselves and turning from our sin.

[In the examples to follow, observation and interpretation are assumed completed before application.]

Is there an example to follow?

Biblical examples are to be duplicated when they are supported by a timeless command, stated or implied by the context, or other Scripture. In Mark 1:35 we read, *And in the early morning, while it was still dark, He [Jesus] arose and went out and departed to a lonely place, and was praying there.* The context tells us it was a very busy time in the life of Christ. Yet, He did not let the demands upon Him stop Him from praying. There is no command in the Bible to pray early in the morning but in Luke 18:1 Jesus taught a parable to show that at all times His disciples ought to pray and not lose heart. 1 Thessalonians 5:17 says, *Pray without ceasing.* So here we have an example to pray supported by a command.

Is there a sin to avoid?

The Word of God raises our consciousness in regard to moral and personal issues. Philippians 2:14 says, *Do all things without grumbling or complaining.* That will not be a problem if it is something we enjoy like golfing or shopping. But it might become a problem if we need to help a friend, especially if it interrupts our schedule. We would need to note where grumbling and complaining is a problem for us and then change our attitude.

Is there a command to obey?

Ephesians 5:18 says, *Be filled with the Spirit.* We are commanded to open ourselves up to the Spirit's control and yield to His will. Obeying God's commands to us is essential if my life is going to manifest God's character.

Is there a condition to meet?

Some promises are based on conditions. Galatians 5:16 says, *But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.* We can stop gratifying our fleshly desires when we meet the condition of depending upon the Holy Spirit for guidance and power.

Is there an attitude to adopt?

Philippians 2:5 says, *Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.* Verses 6-11 explain this attitude as the selfless humility of Jesus Christ, an attitude we must adopt in our lives and relationships.

Is there a motivation to acquire?

2 Corinthians 5:9 says, *Therefore also we have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him.* Our motivation on earth should be the same as in heaven, to be pleasing to Him.

Application Principles

There are many issues of contemporary life that the Bible never specifically addresses. We can bridge this gap between the ancient world of the Bible and our own contemporary situation with the fundamental principles God wants us to apply.

A principle is a succinct statement of a universal truth.

Principles should reflect the mind of God.

We need to realize that when it comes to the Bible we are basically reading somebody else's mail. That divinely inspired inerrant mail does have some promises we can all claim, like, *as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God* (John 1:12). And 2 Chronicles 7:14, previously mentioned, was written to Israel but can be applied to all of

us by asking how it reflects the mind of God. 2 Chronicles 7:14 tells us God is motivated to restore us when we keep His commands.

Principles should be reinforced by the general teaching of the Bible.

A universal truth from Daniel's life might be, it is possible to live righteously while surrounded by an unrighteous environment and people. This is reinforced by Ephesians 4:17-24 and 5:8-16 which challenges us to keep our standards high, act wisely, and live righteously in ungodly situations we may face. Since this principle is reinforced with other passages, we should apply it.

Principles must be relevant to our needs, interests, questions, and problems.

A by-product of the sexual revolution in our culture is the epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases. God's timeless solution to this problem is for a man and a woman to enjoy a monogamous sexual relationship in the context of a lifelong commitment to one another in marriage (1 Corinthians 7:1-5; Hebrews 13:4). The problem is solved when we apply the principle that monogamous marriage controls sexually transmitted diseases.

Principles should indicate a specific course of action.

What are we going to do with this truth? When, where, and how are we going to apply it? 1 Corinthians 13 describes what it means to love. A specific course of action will help us apply this teaching in our individual situations. For example, because love is patient, we should be more patient with our spouse. A principle might be that to love is to refuse to be irritated. If biblical principles are going to be effective, then they must produce specific action in specific areas of our lives.

Questions and Answers

Q: *What is the value of application?*

A: We change our attitude and actions to conform to God's character when we apply the Bible to our lives.

Q: *How do we apply a passage?*

A: Application involves asking questions and formulating universal principles, after observing and interpreting passages, so we can discern where we need to apply God's Word in our lives.

Q: *What do we do with our applications?*

A: We decide upon a specific course of action, based on our interpretation.

Q: *Can a passage have more than one application?*

A: There can be only one correct interpretation but there can be more than one correct application.

* Some of the material in this brochure came from "Living by the Book" by Howard and William Hendricks (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991). I highly recommend this book for further study on this subject.