

MODULE FIVE

APPLICATION

Life-change is the desired result of effective Bible study. Christians want to become more like Christ. Pastors and teachers have been given to the church to help Christians grow. According to Paul, the responsibility of pastors and teachers is to:

Equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. (Ephesians 4:12–13)

DISCUSSION: Signs of Maturity

The book of Hebrews likens the Christian maturing process to the transition from drinking milk to eating solid food.

You have been believers so long now that you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things about God's word. You are like babies who need milk and cannot eat solid food. For someone who lives on milk is still an infant and doesn't know how to do what is right. Solid food is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong. (Hebrews 5:12–14)

Paul wrote to the church at Corinth using the same word picture.

Dear brothers and sisters, when I was with you I couldn't talk to you as I would to spiritual people. I had to talk as though you belonged to this world or as though you were infants in Christ. I had to feed you with milk, not with solid food, because you weren't ready for anything stronger. And you still aren't ready, for you are still controlled by your sinful nature. You are jealous of one another and quarrel with each other. Doesn't that prove you are controlled by your sinful nature? Aren't you living like people of the world? (1 Corinthians 3:1–3)

Spiritual nourishment is the main metaphor in *Searching the Scriptures*. By learning how to study the Bible, Christians can feed themselves spiritually; in other words, they can fend for themselves. In this regard, the role of pastors is like that of the parent—to nurture, model, explain, and encourage the church toward maturity. At every step of the way, we must identify and motivate the changes that need to be made.

THE MIND-SET OF APPLICATION

Think like a Parent

DISCUSSION: Application of Knowing God Is Eternal

What difference does it make to know that our God is timeless and eternal?

If God is *not* eternal, then:

On the other hand, believing that God is eternal:

What's clear is that even the most "philosophical" doctrines affect the way we live out our faith.

Every time you look into the pages of the Bible, think of each page as a mirror. God's Word convicts us of our sinful habits and offensive tendencies. We must respond by doing something about it. Again, that's application. . . . The Bible was not given to satisfy idle curiosity; it was given to transform our lives.¹

STEP ONE

Move toward the Right Application

In the end of the last session, we considered how to discern the truth that is always true within a section of Scripture. Discerning the universal truth is the starting point for solid application. Many elements in a passage are true but not all those elements may be applicable for our time and place.

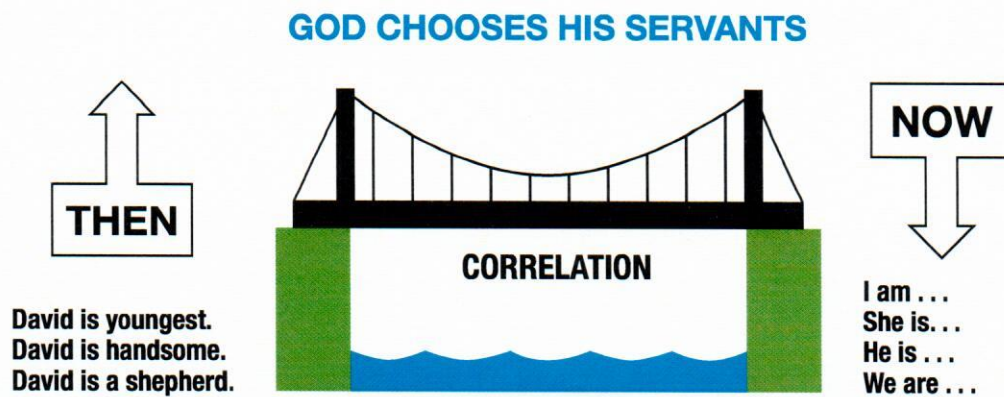
In the same way all seven of Jesse's sons were presented to Samuel. But Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen any of these." Then Samuel asked, "Are these all the sons you have?" "There is still the youngest," Jesse replied. "But he's out in the fields watching the sheep and goats." "Send for him at once," Samuel said. "We will not sit down to eat until he arrives." So Jesse sent for him. He was dark and handsome, with beautiful eyes. And the LORD said, "This is the one; anoint him." (1 Samuel 16:10–12)

What is the "always-true" truth at work in this passage?

This universal and timeless truth can be validated by correlation with many other instances where God chose His servants.

Of course, the other details in the scene can serve to amplify our message. They are given to highlight the central truth. David was an unlikely candidate because of his situation in the same way that we are all unlikely candidates in our own situations.

Bridging the Application Gap



When we have discerned the always-true truth from the Bible passage, we can start to apply that truth to our own situation with a degree of confidence. The diagram above illustrates how the universal truth, “God chooses His servants,” bridges the events in 1 Samuel 16:10–12 and the world in which we live.

DISCUSSION: Knowing That God Chooses His Servants

What practical difference does it make for us today that God chooses His servants? Knowing this universal truth helps us:

STEP TWO

Settle on the Right Application

In this section, we'll address passages in which the universal truth is clearly stated, implied, or obscure.

Clearly Stated Meaning

Sometimes the necessary applications are in plain view on the pages of Scripture but need to be signposted so they can be taken personally.

My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim to have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favor some people over others? For example, suppose someone comes into your meeting dressed in fancy clothes and expensive jewelry, and another comes in who is poor and dressed in dirty clothes. If you give special attention and a good seat to the rich person, but you say to the poor one, "You can stand over there, or else sit on the floor"—well, doesn't this discrimination show that your judgments are guided by evil motives? (James 2:1–4)

It's not difficult to understand what James was telling the church of his day:

This truth is always true, and so it applies to us today.

KEY THOUGHT

The pastor's task is to think of ways in which the universal truth manifests itself today and to find creative ways to illustrate how it happens.

Implied Meaning

At other times, the necessary truth for application might be veiled in the details of the text and need explanation. In these cases, more explanation is required so the historical situation becomes relevant to contemporary life.

Her brother Absalom saw her and asked, "Is it true that Amnon has been with you? Well, my sister, keep quiet for now, since he's your brother. Don't you worry about it." So Tamar lived as a desolate woman in her brother Absalom's house. When King David heard what had happened, he was very angry. And though Absalom never spoke to Amnon about this, he hated Amnon deeply because of what he had done to his sister. (2 Samuel 13:20–22)

David was angry but issued no immediate consequences for the sin of his first-born son Amnon. Perhaps David was passive because his seduction of Bathsheba cost him the moral high ground. Whatever the reason for his passivity, he did not confront or resolve his daughter's rape. He could have sustained her livelihood through permanent insoluble marriage as instructed in Deuteronomy 22:29.

David's failure to do justice in his own household eventually led to the unraveling of his family. Absalom's simmering fury led to the murder of Amnon and to rebellion against David himself.

DISCUSSION: Principles from David's Passivity

David's failure to respond to sin is a long and complicated story. What are some of the many timeless, always-true truths embedded in this account?

Pastors should take the universal truths (or one of them) and show how relevant they are to their listeners.

The application needs to be recognizable and practical. Pastors need to find ways to make the truth so relevant that people clearly see a path of action. But consider this caution: *The pulpit is not the place to settle personal scores or humiliate specific people.* Even when a brother or sister has stumbled, the place for confronting their individual sin should be a sequence of private conversations in the first place, carefully offering an opportunity for repentance (Matthew 18:15–17; Galatians 6:1).

Obscure Meaning

Sometimes an application and the relevance of a passage can be difficult to determine. These situations demand careful attention, and the diligence of pastors is most necessary. We know that all Scripture is applicable because it is all given for our benefit by God through His Spirit.

Elders who do their work well should be respected and paid well, especially those who work hard at both preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "You must not muzzle an ox to keep it from eating as it treads out the grain." And in another place, "Those who work deserve their pay!" (1 Timothy 5:17–18)

In this teaching, Paul applied the *principle* of the text of Deuteronomy 25:4, which concerns oxen put to work.

Interestingly, Paul validated his interpretation by correlating it with a statement from Luke 10:7: "Those who work deserve their pay."

This is a direct quotation from the lips of Jesus as recorded for us by Luke in reference to the ministry of the seventy disciples. In just a few lines, Paul illustrated interpretation, correlation, and application in his advice to Timothy!

KEY THOUGHT

When working with obscure texts, pastors should use careful discernment to understand when always-true connections are valid.

STEP THREE

Communicate the Right Application

A useful motto to remember is this: “Application is *obedience in action*.”² For this reason, the most effective way to communicate application is to live it out personally. This means that in addition to understanding the Scriptures, a certain amount of self-understanding needs to take place as well.

- **Think** about _____.
- **Acknowledge** where _____.
- **Ask** _____.
- **Pursue** _____.

Pastors must think and pray through the life experiences of their congregations. The people who listen to their sermons every week have their own questions, problems, doubts, and challenges, which pastors might not have personally experienced. Some who come to the meetings might not even be Christian. What is on their minds as they listen?

The intention of the original author for the original audience might have been to comfort, challenge and correct, motivate and encourage, lead to praise, or reveal hope. These intentions can, through careful application, connect the original message to the needs of the contemporary audience.

*Pastors ought to look carefully for analogies between the first recipients and the congregation today. Whenever such analogies can be established, the message addressed to God’s people in the past can easily be shifted to God’s people today—assuming, of course, that the context of the canon does not change that message.*³

MODULE FIVE REVIEW

Application is the goal of preaching. Through appropriate application, the church grows to maturity of faith in Christ. Application is obedience in action, and without it, the work of the pastor falls short. The task of pastors is to recognize the always-true truth in any given Scripture and apply that eternal truth in terms of actions and attitudes that are relevant today—first in their own lives and then in the lives of the members of the congregation.

MODULE SIX PREVIEW

The next session will be our last formal time together, and you are encouraged to be ready for a good discussion as we listen to examples of the *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study method presented for us. As we take this method to heart and make it our own, we will find that even though the method itself is consistent, each of us brings our own voice to the process. No two sermons will ever be identical, because the Spirit of God uses all of us uniquely. Some ideas will inevitably occur to all of us when we are working with the same passage, of course. But there is always something fresh and challenging to hear when we listen carefully to the work of others.

ASSIGNMENT

Bringing It All Together

At the beginning of the course, we gave particular attention to four New Testament passages: Ephesians 1:3–14, Philippians 4:4–9, John 3:1–10, and Luke 4:16–21.

You have looked at these passages in terms of observation, interpretation, and correlation. By now you are probably already thinking through how to discern solid applications from your chosen text. In the next session, we will ask four of you to share your progress by presenting a short devotional, one from each text.

Aim for six minutes or fewer than a thousand words. This also means there is very little time for elaborate illustrations and no time at all for rabbit trails. Remember, you are looking for an always-true truth that can bridge the time between the original audience and today's audience. Based on that truth-bridge, suggest an application that is relevant for church pastors in the twenty-first century.

MODULE FIVE APPLICATION

What Difference Does It Make Today?

Motivation to Study

If Jesus was a Jew and came for the Jews, it seems reasonable to ask what is the significance of Judaism today? It's worth a serious look. A solid study of Romans 9–11 would be a start as well as Revelation 7.

Encouragement to Persevere

If God can keep a promise over the span of seven hundred years (Isaiah to Christ), then He is a God who keeps His promises in His own time; He is a God of long horizons:

- I can be patient when I don't get an answer to prayer when I want it.
- I can trust God's perfect timing and be ready to respond quickly to His leading.
- You might have been waiting a long time for your prayer to be answered. Don't give up, and don't stop praying. Don't stop longing for the outcome. When God wills it, it will be. And it will be just right.

Challenge to Precise Speech

Precision of speech was important to Jesus: He didn't say more than He intended (Isaiah 61:2b), but He did say everything He intended.

- You might be one who says too little, not putting the whole message on the table. An incomplete story leaves people to “draw their own confusions,” which can result in error.
- You might be the kind who says and offers too much too often. We can't promise more than God does.
- Either way, we can learn a lesson in precision from our Lord. Determine what *must* be said and *say it*. Equally, determine what goes too far—stretches the truth or takes too much liberty—and *don't say it*.