



SO WHAT?—PREACHING AND APPLICATION

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Definitions:

Interpretation is the process of applying sensible hermeneutical principles to discover the original author's intended meaning.

- Interpretation discovers the passage's significance to everyone, everywhere, all the time, because it discovers the original author's meaning.

Application refers to the various ways the original author's one meaning affects life today.

- Application refers to the different ways different people at different times in different places can live out the one meaning of the text.

Two illustrations:

Bridge building:

Application involves bridging the gap between the ancient text and the modern world. John Stott illustrates this with the title of his book on preaching, *Between Two Worlds*. The preacher stands with one foot in the ancient world of the God-revealed biblical text and with his other foot firmly planted in the modern world that he and his listeners live in.

Bowstring:

Every sermon is stretched like a bowstring between the text of the Bible on the one hand and the problems of contemporary human life on the other. If the string is insecurely tethered to either end, the bow is useless. (quoted in Chapell, 243)

Implications: Not all passages have a direct, obvious, "Do this on Tuesday" application. They do, however, have profound implications—logical connections or ramifications that affect all of life.

Example:

A sermon on God's glory might be ruined by a pedantic set of step-by-step applications at the end. Let the congregation leave with implications of God's majestic glory reverberating in their heads. The Holy Spirit will take it down to the level of day-by-day application.

The need for application:

Martin Luther:

[The Bible] is not merely to be repeated or known, but to be lived and felt.

Jesus condemned the Pharisees for failing to live what they taught (Matt 23:1-4). Paul said, "Knowledge makes arrogant." You might add, "Application makes humble."

Luther again:

Preach so that if people don't hate their sin, they will hate you. (quoted in Abendroth, *Jesus Christ: the Prince of Preachers*, 89)

Garvie:

Preaching is not merely a communication of knowledge its aim is to evoke faith, stimulate to duty, and sustain hope. (Garvie, *The Christian Preacher*, 12-13)

Michael Fabarez:

Bringing an application over the centuries ... is ... the essential discipline that separates an aimless sermon from a truly life-changing sermon. (*Preaching that Changes Lives*, 43)

Christians often have very little skill at moving from the meaning of the text to its application for their lives. If they are bad interpreters, they are often even worse when it comes to creating legitimate applications. A preacher can, and must offer help to his listeners in this area.

Spurgeon on the role of the Spirit in application:

The bell in the steeple may be well hung, fairly fashioned, and of soundest metal, but it is dumb until the ringer makes it speak. And ... the preacher has no voice of quickening for the dead in sin or of comfort for living saints unless the divine [S]pirit gives him a gracious pull, and begs him speak with power. (in quoted in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, 83)

Crafting legitimate applications

Controlling principle:

A good application must be built solidly on the foundation of a right interpretation of the passage.

Fabarez:

The same vigilance we demonstrate in interpreting a passage's meaning must be shown in interpreting its significance.

Fabarez's example:

To use Philippians 4:13 ("I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me") to excite a congregation to give to a church building project would be a gross misapplication of the scriptural intent. (Preaching that Changes Lives, 40)

Four Questions to ask:

1) Does the author himself give an application in the context?

Examples:

Eph 4:22-24, 25-32. Paul applied the put off/put on principle to lying, anger, stealing, speech, relationship sins, and forgiving.

Eph 5:21; 5:22-6:9. Paul applied the principle of submission in key human authority-and-submission relationships.

2) How did the text apply to the original audience?

Fabarez:

Expending the effort to thoroughly consider the implications of a particular passage for its original recipients is a step that deserves our time and attention. It will prevent us from drifting too far afield in our quest to find an appropriate application for our contemporary audience. (Preaching that Changes Lives, 42)

Example:

Satan extracted the verses of Psalm 91 from their context to prompt an action that was unrelated to the initial purpose of the Scripture. (ibid., 41)

Liefeld's positive comment:

I believe that the more vivid and concrete we can make the function of a passage in its original life setting appear to the congregation, the more effective the application of that text will be. (Liefeld, New Testament Exposition, 98)

Examples:

Eph 5:3-6 travelling comedians/speakers; modern entertainment
Ps 33:16-17 fear of war

3) What spiritual concerns do my listeners share in common with the people to whom (or about whom) the text was written?

Because human sin doesn't really change, many texts apply easily and immediately:

Examples:

1 Thess 5:18. *In everything give thanks.*

1 Thess 4:3. *This is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality.*

Brian Chapell:

A sermon [shows] ... how contemporary persons should respond to a mutual condition we share with those who were the original subjects or recipients of the text... (Christ-Centered Preaching, 106)

Chapell calls the mutual connections between the ancient readers and our modern listeners the *Fallen Condition Focus*.

The Fallen Condition Focus is the mutual human condition that contemporary believers share with those to whom or about whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage for God's people to glorify and enjoy him [It is any] aspect or problem of the human condition that requires the instruction admonition, and/or comfort of Scripture. (50, 51-2)

Ultimately a sermon is about how a text says we are to respond biblically to the FCF as it is experienced in our lives.

[Therefore, the] preacher must "discern the human concern that caused the Holy Spirit to inspire this aspect of Scripture What were the struggles, concerns, or frailties of the persons to whom the text was originally addressed? (Christ-Centered Preaching, 48-49)

The question restated:

What do "I" or "we" encounter today that is similar or at least closely related to what the passage deals with? The life issues will emerge from the exegetical data on one hand, and from your own knowledge of the world on the other. (Stuart, Old Testament Exegesis, 41)

Fabarez's summary:

- *The original recipients: What was the text intended to change in their lives?*
- *What does [my] audience have in common with the original audience? (Preaching that Changes Lives, 39, 48)*
- *What should this text change in my life, and in my congregants' lives?*

Examples of *immediate*, *medium*, and *distant* mutual conditions:

Immediate:

Matt 12:36. Every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgement.

Here there is a one-to-one correlation between the ancient and modern problem of careless words.

Medium:

Isaiah 1:12-13. When you come before Me, who requires of you this trampling of My courts? Bring your worthless offerings no longer...

Ritual church attendance by cultural Christians isn't *exactly* the same as what Isaiah was rebuking, but it is very similar, so much so, that the application seems unavoidable.

Distant:

Ecc 7:14. The temptation of the wisdom school (such as Job's friends) to use the "you reap what you sow" principle as a means to control whether you get good or calamity from God. They believed that, if you live well, God will give you only good. This is a kind of "formula living" intended to place restrictions on God's sovereignty.

Modern attempts at formula living:

The Word-Faith movement. The prosperity teachers also believe that you can control God so that He will give you only good if you follow their faith formulas. The connection here is distant, but valid. The FCF is the never-ending temptation to back God into a corner, forcing Him to give only blessing and not calamity.

Question: What do you do when a text does not have an immediate and obvious modern application?

4) Is there a timeless principle implicit in the text that summarises the legitimate applications of that text?

Roy Zuck:

When scripture does not speak specifically to us, we should look for a principle that does tell us something. The principle is a general statement deduced from the specific original situation. (quoted in unpublished TMS preaching syllabus)

Kaiser:

*To "principlize" is to state the author's propositions, arguments, narrations, and illustrations in timeless abiding truths with special focus on the application of those truths to the current needs of the Church. (Kaiser, *Toward and Exegetical Theology*, 152)*

Mayhue:

One must first process the text for original meaning and then principlize the text for current applicability. (Rediscovering Expository Preaching, 16)

Note: You can and should principlise even immediate and obvious passages.

Making a timeless, abiding principle:

Rom 12:2a *Do not be conformed to this world ...*

Principle: *Don't think or act like unbelievers.*

Paul's example: 1 Timothy 5:17-18

Paul applies this text regarding oxen to preachers. How could he do that? Paul saw the timeless principle inherent in Deuteronomy 25:4: *The one doing the work should share in the benefits of the work.* Paul believed that principle applied just as well to people as it did to oxen.

He didn't change the interpretation of the passage. The interpretation was, the oxen who threshes the wheat by pulling a threshing sled across it should share in the nutritional benefits of his work. Paul didn't change the interpretation, he just focused on the timeless principle behind that command.

Although Paul doesn't walk you through his process of principising that passage, it's clear that he did principise Deuteronomy 25:4 in order to use it in 1 Timothy 5.

Let's reproduce Paul's process:

The four-step process of principisation:

1. Biblical text: *He who steals must steal no longer.* (Eph 4:28)
2. Original meaning: *Don't take something that doesn't belong to you.*
3. Principle: *Don't take what isn't yours or not yours to use in that way.*

The principle is a quick, catchy summary of the meaning of the command.

4. Applications: Don't shop lift a candy bar. Don't lie on your time card. Don't cheat on your taxes. Don't take computer paper home from work for personal use.

Note: There is an obvious, undeniable correspondence between the original meaning, the timeless principle, and the applications we've created.

Characteristics of a legitimate principle:

1. There must be a clear correspondence between the original meaning of the text and your principle.

Two tests:

1) The *subject/action* test:

There must be a clear correspondence between the *subject* and the *action* of the text and the *subject* and the *action* of your principle. (1 Timothy 5: *Subject*: a worker benefiting from his work. *Action*: pay a hard-working preacher).

2) The *stretch* test:

The farther the stretch of logic between the original meaning and the application, the less compelling the application. Note: we'll see some examples of the stretch test in a few moments.

2. The principle must be timeless.
3. The principle must not be culturally bound.

Applications will often be culturally bound; however, a good *principle* applies to everyone, everywhere, all the time.

4. The principle must not violate other teaching of Scripture.

Romans 3:20 example:

You are preaching on Romans 3:20, *By the works of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight*. Not many people in your congregation are tempted to credit their salvation to their circumcision or to following the purification laws of Leviticus. How will you apply the passage?

Question:

Can you generalise or principlise this statement? Can the application be extended, for example, to water baptism?

Is it legitimate to principlise or generalise the phrase "the works of the law" by saying, "By *religious ritual* or moral efforts no flesh will be justified in His sight"?

The phrase *religious ritual* encompasses all Jewish, OT rituals *and* the NT ritual of water baptism.

Biblical text: *By the works of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight.*

Original meaning: No external religious Mosaic ceremony or moral efforts make you right with God.

Principle: No external religious ritual or moral effort makes you right with God.

Note:

To make this a timeless principle, we simply extracted the word *Mosaic* from the previous statement, thus removing the limiting time reference.

Application: Water baptism does not make you right with God.

Applying the *subject/action* and *stretch* test:

Subject: In both the original text and our application, the subject is being right with God or justification.

Action: In both cases, the action being encouraged is abandoning religious ritual or moral effort as a means of becoming right with God.

Stretch test: While there is a difference between OT circumcision, for example, and water baptism, everyone understands the parallel between OT rituals and NT rituals. The gap, in this case, is very small and easy to step over.

Proverbs 5:7-8 example:

You are preaching on sexual purity. Can you use Proverbs 5:7-8 to teach your people to avoid the temptation of internet pornography?

Biblical command: *Do not go near the door of her [the adulteress's] house.*

Original meaning: Do not go near the door of [the adulteress's] house.

The great thing about Proverbs is when they're clear, they're really clear!

Principle: Don't place yourself in situations where sexual sin is virtually inevitable (you can avoid a lot of sin just by avoiding it!).

Application: Make a commitment not to surf the internet or not to surf without your husband or wife present.
Don't turn your computer on when you're bored. Use it only as a tool to accomplish your work.
Take a different route home from work to avoid the CNA where you used to buy your pornographic magazines.

Is this a legitimate principle? Yes.

Subject/action test:

- There is a clear correspondence of *subject* (sexual sin).
- There is a clear correspondence of *action* (avoid the geography—physical or electronic—where you will have opportunity to commit sexual sin).

Stretch test:

- Although there was no internet in Solomon's day, everyone can easily see the parallel between avoiding the geography of the adulteress and avoiding the geography of internet porn. The stretch here is very acceptable.

In-class assignment:

Preachers and counsellors often use 2 Cor 6:14-18 to teach that believers should not marry unbelievers. Based on our principle of correlation between *subject* and *action*, is it better to use 2 Cor 6:14-18 or 1 Cor 7:39 to address the issue of marrying an unbeliever?

Tips on application:

- 1) Develop scenarios that show how the timeless principle you have drawn from the text would apply in different situations.

Jesus' example:

Matt 6:1	the principle
Matt 6:2-18	three life situations to which that principle applies: alms giving, prayer, and fasting.

Paul's example:

Eph 4:22-24	the principle
Eph 4:25-32	five sins to which it applies: lying, anger, stealing, unwholesome words, and relationship sins.

Phil 2:3-4	the principle
Phil 1-2	examples of the principle being applied

Christ	2:5
Paul	1:21-25
Timothy	2:19-22
Epaphroditus	2:25, 30

- 2) Is there anything in the context that limits the application to a particular target audience?

Restated: What does my congregation *not* have in common with the original audience?

Fabarez:

The Pastoral Epistles provide a good example. Many of the commands to Timothy and Titus are seemingly timeless principles regarding the Christian life. Yet note that some of the intended application is directed specifically to pastors and their ministerial leadership in the church. This is a very important and limiting observation. (Preaching that Changes Lives, 44)

Example: 2 Tim 2:15

Of course, the pastoral epistles ought to be preached to those who are not in ministry, and the principles ought to make a difference in every hearer's life... (ibid., 44).

But be aware that you are stretching the application further than the original intent, *and* make your congregation aware of that too.

Suggestion:

"Although this is written to Timothy as a preacher, it also has application to you, because you also are a Bible interpreter every time you open your Bible and read it."

This makes the congregation aware that you are stretching the immediate application farther than Paul initially intended it. You are respecting the author's original meaning and application. Having done that, however, the connection is clear enough that no one will debate the legitimacy of applying 2 Timothy 2:15 to Christians generally.

Other questions from Fabarez:

- Does any other part of the Bible limit the target audience?

The application of Leviticus to my audience is even further removed from the immediate context of the pastoral epistles, because the rest of the Bible shows us that the sacrificial ceremonial system of Leviticus has been fulfilled in Christ. Plenty of application may be proclaimed to a contemporary audience regarding dietary laws and Israel's festivals or Sabbath regulations, but our application here must look different from the original one... (Preaching that Changes Lives, 44-45)

- Does a cultural condition limit the target of application.

Example: 1 Tim 5:23 use a little wine

Modern medicinal treatments are probably superior to this personal advice.

- Does a unique historical condition limit the target of application? Or was the narrative passage I'm studying given to serve as a template for us to follow?

Examples:

- Luke 18:22 *Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor*
- miracles performed by Jesus and the apostles

- How are my listeners already practicing the application?

This avoids the problem of preaching to the choir or of offering conviction when you should be commending your people for God's grace in their lives

- How are my listeners currently neglecting this application?

It may be helpful to force yourself to complete this sentence: "My hearer's greatest need regarding this passage is..." (*ibid.*, 52)

Douglas Stuart adds this warning:

Does the passage call for a response that could possibly be misunderstood and taken too far? It is often at least as crucial to explain how a passage does not apply than to explain how it does. (Old Testament Exegesis, 42)

3) Circles of life that require specific applications:

- work
- school
- family
- church
- leisure time
- current events

People to address:

- men
- women
- children
- believers
- nominal believers
- unbelievers

Summary:

Four key questions:

- 1) Does the author himself give an application in the context?
- 2) How did the text apply to the original audience?
- 3) What spiritual concerns do my listeners share in common with that original audience?
- 4) Is there a timeless principle implicit in the text that summarises the legitimate applications of that text?

Two key tests:

- Is there a clear subject/action correlation between the text and my application of the text?
- Am I stretching the application beyond the original author's intent?

Observatin:

If your leap of logic is too great, then your application loses its authority and impact, and everything you say about the passage will be discredited.