

PREACHING CHRIST
LECTURE 8
APPLICATION (1): HOW TO APPLY A SERMON

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of these addresses we have looked at:

1. Preparation: How to prepare to preach
2. Selection: How to select a text
3. Interrogation: How to examine a text
4. Variation: How to vary your sermons
5. Introduction: How to introduce a sermon
6. Organisation: How to organise a sermon

We now come, seventhly, to Application: How to apply a sermon. We shall consider the principles of application in this lecture, and the practice of application in the next.

Before looking at the principles of application, I would like to make two preliminary points. Firstly, I would like to briefly consider the meaning of “application”, and secondly, I would like to highlight the scriptural justification for application.

Firstly, then, let us look at some definitions. Jay Adams wrote:

Application is the...process by which preachers make scriptural truths so pertinent to members of their congregations that they not only understand how these truths should effect changes in their lives but also feel obligated and perhaps even eager to implement those changes.¹

Al Martin said:

Application is the arduous task of suffusing the sermon with pointed, specific, and discriminating force to the conscience.²

My own definition is:

Application is the process by which the unchanging principles of God’s word are brought into life-changing contact with people who live in an ever-changing world.

This may seem obvious. However, some exegetes of Scripture think that once they have explained the meaning of the text, their work is done. They make no attempt to determine what the text means now. Exegesis then becomes a merely academic and scholarly exercise detached from real life.

Other exegetes do have a desire to connect Scripture with real life, but believe that is the job of the Holy Spirit, not the preacher. They say, “We explain the text and the Spirit applies it.” This tends to leave the hearers at the mercy of their own subjective inclinations. As Douglas Stuart commented:

The exegete, who has come to know the passage best, refuses to help the reader or hearer of the passage at the very point where the reader’s or hearer’s

¹ Jay Adams, *Truth Applied* (London: Wakeman Trust, 1990), 17.

² Al Martin.

interest is keenest. The exegete leaves the key function – response – completely to the subjective sensibilities of the reader or hearer, who knows the passage least.³

What is even more likely is that the hearers will do nothing at all. John Calvin noted:

If we leave it to men's choice to follow what is taught them, they will never move one foot. Therefore, the doctrine of itself can profit nothing at all.⁴

This then brings us on to our second preliminary point: we need to show that application is warranted and justified by Scripture. We do this by highlighting here just some of the many examples of application which we find in the Bible itself.

In Matthew 19:16-22 Christ applied the law to the rich young ruler. In Acts 2:22-27 Peter applied the prophetic Scriptures of the Old Testament to his generation. In 1 Corinthians 10:11 Paul says that the history of Israel was written as an example and admonition to all later generations. Finally, Paul affirms that "whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope" (Rom.15:4).

So convinced was that great preacher Spurgeon of the necessity of application that he said: "Where the application begins, there the sermon begins."

Having made these preliminary points let us now look at the principles of application.

1. Preaching passage

It may appear to be stating the obvious to say that application should be based upon the Bible, and particularly the Bible passage being preached upon. However, it does need to be re-stated, as the Bible is increasingly set aside in many churches, and in its place come moving stories and personal anecdotes from which "morals" are drawn, or in which "inspiration" is found. The faithful preacher must base his application on God's Word, and on the particular passage which his sermon has been about. Douglas Stuart said:

An application should be just as rigorous, just as thorough, and just as analytically sound as any other step in the exegesis process. It cannot be merely tacked on to the rest of the exegesis as a sort of spiritual afterthought. Moreover it must carefully reflect the data of the passage if it is to be convincing. Your reader needs to see how you derived the application as the natural and final stage of the entire process of careful, analytical study of your passage.⁵

So, application must be based on the Bible, and upon the particular preaching passage of that day. However, preachers must also ensure that their application is consistent with the rest of Scripture. We must be careful not to found a doctrine or practice on an isolated or "obscure" text or chapter, without checking that the doctrine or practice is consistent with the message of Scripture as a whole.

2. Primary

We must not draw our applications from the accidental, incidental, or coincidental parts of a passage, but from its essentials alone. This is especially important to bear in mind when

³ Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 2001), 27-28.

⁴ John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistles to Timothy and Titus* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983), 2 Timothy 4:1-2.

⁵ Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 2001), 27-28.

preaching from historical narratives or parables. Often the parables are making only one point, and so we must not found a doctrine or practice on one of the incidental points. An old Baptist minister used to tell young preachers, “Don’t turn a monopod into a centipede.” One of the best ways of finding the primary application(s) of a particular passage is by asking, “What was the original application, to the original audience, at the original time of writing?” Jay Adams wrote:

The truth God revealed in Scripture came in an applied form and should be reapplied to the same sort of people for the same purposes for which it was originally given. That is to say, truth should be applied today just as God originally applied it.⁶

3. Persistent

Although at times it may be appropriate to leave application to the conclusion of a sermon, it is usually best to apply throughout.

Charles Bridges highlights the persistent application of history and doctrine throughout the book of Hebrews and concludes:

The method of perpetual application, therefore, where the subject will admit of it, is probably best calculated for effect – applying each head distinctly...⁷

In *Truth Applied* Jay Adams speaks of applicatory introductions, as well as conclusions: “It [application] should begin with the first sentence and continue throughout” (p119). Perhaps Adams goes a bit far here in stating his case. However, the general point of persistent application, at least after every substantive point, is again made.

4. Prepared

While many preachers will spend hours on preparing their exegesis, they will often spend minimal if any time on application. Sometimes this is for “spiritual” reasons. The preacher may point to texts such as Matthew 10:19 and say that the Spirit will provide the words in accordance with his promise. However, promises of the Spirit’s help to speak without preparation were given to those facing arrests, court trials and other dangers. They were not applicable to ordinary preaching situations. Remember the words of Douglas Stuart previously quoted:

An application should be just as rigorous, just as thorough, and just as analytically sound as any other step in the exegesis process.

Unprepared application usually means repetitive and ineffectual application, as the preacher, now mentally tired after the exertions of explaining his text, resorts to the well-worn tramlines of application he has travelled down time and again in the past.

One of the best ways to prepare applications is to pray over your sermon and ask God to show you how to apply it. God’s Spirit knows the hearts of your hearers better than you do, and He can reveal people’s needs to you by His Spirit. A prayerful spirit while preaching can also result in God guiding you to speak to specific needs in your hearers. Also, as the fear of man can ensnare and so disable application, we need to pray for constant deliverance from it.

⁶ Jay Adams, *Truth Applied* (London: Wakeman Trust, 1990), 17.

⁷ Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983), 275.

5. Present

Our applications should be up-to-date and related to the present. There is no point in simply taking the applications made by the Puritans and Reformers and repeating them verbatim to our own modern congregations. Their applications were up-to-date when they made them, but many of them are now past their “use by” date.

One of the greatest helps to application is keeping up-to-date with both the world we live in and the people we pastor. Only then can we know what our people are troubled with, concerned about, interested in, and in danger of, and so preach to these needs.

Another way to improve your application is to go through your congregation and try to describe each person with one word which characterises their spiritual condition or status. You will then have a ready-made checklist of the various kinds of hearers in your congregation to focus your application on.

To get you started here are some **broad categories** of listeners which you might aim application at:

Christian/non-Christian, Old/Young, Rich/Poor, Parents/Children/Singles, Employer/Employee, Government/Citizen, Male/Female, Atheist/Agnostic/Persecutor

And here are some **narrower categories** of people which may be found in some, many, or even all of each of the broader categories:

The sick, dying, afflicted, tempted, backslidden, hypocrite, immoral, discouraged, worried, tired, seeking salvation/assurance, doubter, proud, bereaved, broken-hearted, convicted, etc.

6. Personal

Daniel Webster exclaimed, “When a man preaches to me, I want him to make it a personal matter, a personal matter, a personal matter!”

What does this mean? Well, “personal” application starts with the preacher applying the word to himself. Al Martin said:

Here is the main reason why there is so little applicatory preaching. Men are not applying the Word to their own hearts. A minister’s life is the life of the minister.

However, what we want to focus on here especially is the importance of “second-person” application. Let me explain.

Application may sometimes be in the “first-person”. There are times when the preacher will identify personally with the application. He will then speak in “first-person” terms: “**We** must...”, “...died for **us**”, “**our** privilege is...” (e.g. Heb.4:1, 11, 14, 16).

Application may also, at times, be in the “third-person”. For example, a sermon may be preached to young people on the duties of husbands or wives, when none of the hearers are yet married. The sermon will then speak in third person terms: “**Husbands** will...”, “When **wives** are....”, “**She** usually knows...”. Perhaps there will be application concerning the errors of false religions and the cults, again in terms of “**They** wrongly believe and teach...” (e.g. Titus 1:10-16; Jn.3:5).

However, while first-person and third-person applications are both scriptural and, at times, appropriate, the majority of our applications should be in the “second-person”: “**You** must...”, “**You** should understand...”, “**Your** experience...” (e.g. Jn.3:7; Rom.12:1). This is not to exclude the preacher from the application. However, it does reflect the fact that the preacher holds an “office”. He is not preaching in his own right, but as an ambassador sent by God to deliver a message to the people of God. He, therefore, speaks “in Christ’s stead”, as Christ himself would speak to the people were he present. Such practice will avoid the common scenario highlighted by Al Martin:

Many sermons are like unaddressed, unsigned letters which if 100 people read it they would not think the contents concerned them.

Your hearers must know that they are being addressed personally and even individually. As Charles Bridges said:

Preaching, in order to be effective, must be reduced from vague generalities, to a tangible, individual character – coming home to every man’s business, and even his bosom.⁸

The newspaper editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle* kept a desktop notice saying, “Always remember that a dog fight in Brooklyn is more important than a revolution in China.” Is there an equivalent for preachers?

7. Pointed

It is not enough just to draw a general principle out of a passage (“you should be holy”) but this general principle must be pointed to specific, concrete, everyday situations. “You should be holy” answers the “what?” question. Only by answering the “who?”, “when”, “where?”, “how?”, “why?” questions, do our applications become pointed.

David Veerman put it this way:

Application is answering two questions: So what? And Now what? The first question asks, “Why is this passage important to me?” The second asks, “What should I do about it today?”⁹

We dare not leave our hearers to make the point to themselves. As Bridges noted:

We must not expect our hearers to apply to themselves such unpalatable truths. So unnatural is this habit of personal application, that most will fit the doctrine to anyone but themselves.¹⁰

Massillon, a famous French preacher, used to say, “I don’t want people leaving my church saying, ‘What a wonderful sermon – what a wonderful preacher.’ I want them to go out saying, ‘I will do something.’”

One of the most effective ways of giving our sermons “point” is by trying to direct all our applications to one overall applicatory aim, rather than just a disparate disconnected series of exhortations. Bryan Chapell argues that this should be done at the very end of a sermon:

⁸ Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983), 271.

⁹ David Veerman, “Sermons: Apply Within,” *Leadership* (Spring 1990), 121.

¹⁰ Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983), 270.

The last sixty seconds are typically the most dynamic moments in excellent sermons. With these final words, a preacher marshals the thought and emotion of an entire message into an exhortation that makes all that has preceded clear and compelling. A conclusion is a sermon's destination. Ending contents are alive-packed with tension, drama, energy, and emotion.¹¹

One last point before we leave this point about “point”! When God’s Word is applied to people’s hearts there will be friction which causes pain and heat. When we apply the point of the sword of truth we can expect both action and reaction!

8. Passion

There is no part of the sermon which requires more of the preacher’s emotional involvement. The arguments have been made; now is the time for persuasion. Dabney wrote:

To produce volition, it is not enough that the understanding be convinced; affection must also be aroused.¹²

To do this, the preacher’s own feelings must reflect the nature of the application. If warning, then let there be solemnity; if worshipping, let there be devotion; if promising, let there be confidence; if comforting, let there be tenderness; if commanding, let there be authority, and so on. Dabney again:

The preacher's soul should here show itself fired with the force of the truth which has been developed, and glowing both with light and heat. The quality of unction should suffuse the end of your discourse, and bathe the truth in evangelical emotion. But this emotion must be genuine and not assumed; it must be spiritual, the zeal of heavenly love, and not the carnal heat of the mental gymnastic....It must disclose itself spontaneously and unannounced, as the gushing of a fountain which will not be suppressed. What can give this glow except the indwelling of the Holy Ghost? You are thus led again to that great, ever-recurring deduction, the first qualification of the sacred orator, the grace of Christ.¹³

This is what Samuel Rutherford referred to when he spoke of the need to preach a “felt Christ”.

CONCLUSION

It is on this Christ-centred note I would like to close in an appeal for more Christ-centred application. In a sense, this is the most important point in this lecture. Christ-centred application will deliver us from mere moralising and latent legalism.

What is Christ-centred application? Well, if preaching from Biblical history, then show how that history either pre-figures and points to Christ, or how it eventually leads to him. If preaching from the Psalms, show how appropriate they are for worshipping Christ. If preaching from the Proverbs, show how Christ is the ultimate Wisdom of God. If preaching from the prophets, show how they predict Christ. If preaching from the law, show how it reveals our need of Christ. If preaching practical duties, show how to motivate obedience by love to Christ. If preaching Christ’s words, show the they magnify the Christ who spoke

¹¹ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-centred Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 254.

¹² R L Dabney, *Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 234.

¹³ *Ibid*, 176.

them. If preaching on suffering, show how they bring us into fellowship with Christ's sufferings. If preaching duty, then show how Christ forgives our many failings in the line of duty. If preaching about love, show the example of Christ. If preaching about sin, show Christ as the only Saviour from sin. Let all our application lead to the feet of Christ.