

PREACHING CHRIST
LECTURE 9
APPLICATION (2): HOW TO APPLY A SERMON

INTRODUCTION

In our last lecture we examined some of the principles of sermon application. In this lecture we will examine the practice of sermon application. Specifically we will look at 20 methods of sermon application – 20 ways in which Scripture may be used in a life-changing way. We will briefly explain each method, then give an example from Scripture to justify each method, and then give an example from present day sermons. The main point is to show Scriptural support for each way of applying Scripture. If we can do that then we are justified in using that method of application.

1. Declaration

“Christianity begins with a triumphant indicative,” said Gresham Machen.¹ The sermon, then, is an authoritative declaration of divinely inspired facts. The preacher is communicating vital information from the all-knowing God to largely ignorant human beings. This process of replacing ignorance with knowledge, and falsehood with facts is, in itself, the first application of God’s Word. It is a potentially powerful transforming experience for the hearer, as his ignorance and prejudices are replaced with knowledge and truth. By announcing God’s Word with authority, the preacher is saying, “It is vital that you know these facts...” He is not in the business of suggestion, but of declaration, assertion, and affirmation. Remembering this first application of God’s Word changes “lectures” into “sermons.” Authoritative declarations of the truth also establish and confirm the faith of God’s people.

Scriptural Example:

In Acts 17:22ff Paul preaches the knowledge of God to ignorant and prejudiced hearers. He announces and declares life-changing historical and theological facts.

Sermon Example

A sermon on “God is love” (1 Jn.4:8) benefits its hearers by replacing misunderstanding and misconceptions about God’s love with clear and accurate knowledge of it. This transformational knowledge is, in itself, is an application of God’s Word.

2. Exclamation

Information is made more memorable and engaging when it is applied by way of exclamation. The declaration of the truth is accompanied with heightened emotion as the preacher expresses his approval or disapproval of what he is saying. It was Spurgeon who said that the preacher should pepper his sermons with many “Oh’s...” and “Ah’s...” An exclamative phrase may also begin with “What...” or “How...” For example, “What a great Saviour!” or “How great God is!” The exclamative shows the preacher’s appreciation or deprecation of what is being preached and encourages the congregation to enjoy it or denounce it with him. It appeals to the heart as well as the head.

Scriptural Example

The Psalms are full of exclamation (Ps.8:1,9); 73:19; 104:24). After explaining the mysterious and awesome sovereignty of God, the Apostle exclaims, “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable *are* his judgments, and his ways past finding out!” (Rom.11:33). Also, see Matthew 23 for Christ’s sevenfold woes as he denounces the Pharisees.

¹ J Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 1977), 47.

Sermon Example

When preaching on the beauty of Christ, instead of stating coldly, "Christ is beautiful," the preacher movingly exclaimed "O, the beauty of Christ!" This applies the truth to the feelings and inflames the heart.

3. Interrogation

Having given the information, and invited the congregation to enjoy it, the preacher then challenges his hearers with questions about their own relation to these truths.

Scriptural Example

Interrogation abounds in Romans. For example: "Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? thou that preachest a man should not steal, dost thou steal? (Romans 2:21). Notice also Isaiah's use of rhetorical questions in Isaiah 40:12-14.

Sermon Example

A preacher concluded a sermon on doing religious things only to be seen and applauded by men (Matt.6:1-6), with a series of questions: "Why do you come to church? To be seen of men, or to see God? Why do you pray? So that others will hear, or so that God will hear?"

4. Obligation

The preacher takes the truth and lays practical obligations on his congregation by giving them imperatives and commands which follow logically from the truth.

Scriptural Example

In Exodus 20, God says I redeemed you (v1-2), therefore obey me (v3-17). Paul concludes the substantially doctrinal part of Romans (chapter 1-11) with a number of imperatives in chapter 12.

Sermon Example

A sermon on the lukewarm church of Laodicea (Rev.3:16) was permeated with imperatives such as, "Be zealous...committed...serious...wholehearted...single-minded...etc."

5. Exhortation

Somewhat less confrontational than the imperative is the hortatory "Let us..." With the exhortation the preacher takes more of a sympathetic and involved stance .

Scriptural Example

The Apostle Paul addresses his fellow converted Jews in the letter to the Hebrews with a number of mutual exhortations. "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace...(Heb.4:16; c.f. 4:1; 4:11; 6:1)

Sermon Example

In a sermon on the condescension of Christ in his incarnation (Phil.2:5-11), the preacher followed the apostles application with mutual exhortations to peace, unity, and humility (2:3) in imitation of Christ (2:5).

6. Motivation

Sometimes the preacher may add to 1-5 (above), the motives for information, exclamation, interrogation, obligation and exhortation. He can increase the likelihood of his hearers receiving the information, joining him in the exclamation, answering the interrogation, binding themselves to the obligation, and agreeing with the exhortation by giving scriptural motives for doing so.

Scriptural Example

In 1 Corinthians 15:34 the apostle commanded his hearers, "Awake to righteousness, and sin not..." and then adds this motivating reason, "for some have not the knowledge of God: I speak *this* to your shame."

Sermon Example

When informing his congregation about the deceitful and desperately wicked nature of the human heart (Jer.17:9), the preacher motivated his hearers to listen and respond by explaining the vital importance of knowing our disease if we are ever to seek the right cure.

7. Imitation

The preacher may take Old Testament history as an example of how believers should or should not act in similar circumstances

Scriptural Example

After highlighting parts of Israel's history, Paul said to the Corinthians, "Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted" (1 Cor.10:6; cf v11).

Sermon Example

A sermon on the courage of young David in facing Goliath in God's strength alone (1 Sam.17) must go on to urge imitation on the part of modern Christians as they face great ungodly powers in God's name.

8. Illustration

Sometimes the best way to apply a truth is by illustration or metaphor, by telling a story or painting a picture

(i) Illustration

Scriptural Example

When Jesus wanted to apply the teaching of "Love your neighbour as yourself" he told the story of the "Good Samaritan" (Lk.10:29-37).

Sermon Example

In a sermon on Christ's substitutionary death, a preacher showed the gratitude and love which should result by telling of how indebted he was to his Father when as a teenager he confessed that he had run up a huge and unpayable credit card bill, and his Father in great mercy took the bill and paid it for him.

(ii) Metaphor

Scriptural Example

Instead of warning his disciples to be on their guard lest hypocrisy gradually and imperceptibly encroach and spread, Jesus used the vivid baker's metaphor and said, "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees" (Matt.16:6).

Sermon Example

When a preacher wanted to emphasise the importance of "keeping the heart" (Prov.4:23) he used the illustration of a computer's main chip, its Central Processing Unit, and how it impacts on everything else.

9. Quotation

A preacher may apply Scripture by showing the truth and its relevance from the sayings and writings of others. This may help to buttress and emphasise the lessons in the sermon. There are many examples of the biblical authors using previously written Scripture in this way. However, there are also examples of the biblical authors using secular writers to help apply the truth.

Scriptural Example

Apart from frequently quoting Old Testament scripture, Paul quoted one of the Greek poets to support one of his points during his sermon in Athens (Acts 17:28).

Sermon Example

A preacher found that quoting the words of Spurgeon or Lloyd Jones to support his teaching, made his listeners more likely to receive the teaching. Another used the words of famous non-Christians to show the despair and meaninglessness in even the most "successful" worldly lives. Such quotes can have a dramatic impact on unconverted hearers.

10. Conversation

One of the best ways to get a congregation's attention is to set up a dialogue or conversation between two people. It may be a debate between the preacher and an opponent, or it may be between the preacher and a genuine seeker after the truth.

Scriptural Example

In the book of Romans, Paul frequently set up dialogues between himself and an opponent in order to apply the truth (Rom.3:1-9; 6:1-3).

Sermon Example

In a sermon on creation (Gen.1:1), a preacher applied the truth by carrying on an imaginary conversation between himself and an evolutionist, answering the evolutionists questions and challenging him in return.

11. Condemnation

Once the truth is taught, it may often be necessary for distortions and denials of the truth to be highlighted and condemned.

Scriptural Example

Most of Jude's epistle is an exposure and condemnation of false teachers in the Church of Christ.

Sermon Example

A sermon on the once-for-all uniqueness and sufficiency of Christ's death (Heb.10:14), was concluded with reference to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church regarding the ongoing sacrifice of Christ in the Mass, which the preacher showed to be both blasphemous and dangerous doctrine.

12. Invitation

Having set Christ forth it is then incumbent upon the preacher to call sinners to Him.

Scriptural Example

In Psalm 2, the Psalmist concludes his description of the Messiah's ultimate victory over his foes with, "Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way..." (Ps.2:12).

Sermon Example

No sermon on Christ as the good shepherd (Jn.10:14), could conclude without the hearers being called upon to follow him and be fed by him.

13. Demonstration

Sometimes it is not enough for preachers to simply urge their hearers to do this or that. They must show how to do this or that.

Scriptural Example

When the ten commandments are given in Exodus 20, the following chapters give a number of concrete examples of how to obey them.

Sermon Example

A preacher who was urging his hearers to evangelise the lost on the basis of "Ye shall be witnesses unto me" (Acts 1:8), spent a large part of his sermon on the practicalities of how to evangelise in specific situations.

14. Adoration

It should be natural for a preacher to feel adoration welling up within his heart as he preaches the truth. And, as his devotional spirit is excited, he may let out expressions of worship or even brief petitions heavenwards. Such spontaneous uses of the truth bring its reality and importance home to the hearers.

Scriptural Example

In the Psalms, the writers often move from "third-person" narratives about God to "second-person" addresses of praise to God (Ps.106:4, 47)

Sermon Example

When preaching on the everlasting destruction of sinners, a preacher found himself frequently turning from his congregation to God and saying things like, "Lord Jesus, thou art merciful...Gracious Lord , save us all from hell..."

15. Admonition

The congregation may need to be rebuked or admonished, leading to confession.

Scriptural Example

Isaiah 1-39 sets forth God as the only hope for Israel, and in the light of that repeatedly admonishes and rebukes the people for turning away from God to ungodly nations to be their saviour (Isa.30).

Sermon Example

Someone preaching on "Love not the world..." (1 Jn.2:15) rebuked his hearer's worldliness and lead the congregation in confessing, "Holy God, we have loved the world, we have copied the world, we have followed the world, we have admired the world...Turn us and we shall be turned."

16. Consolation

There are times when a congregation need comfort and encouragement with the truth.

Scriptural Example

In Isaiah 40-66, Isaiah turns from rebuke to comfort. His prophecies assume Israel captive in Babylon, and he encourages them to put their trust in God and look forward to a restoration to their land (e.g.: Isa.40).

Sermon Example

A sermon on the Lord's post-denial pursuit of Peter (Jn.21) was used by a preacher to encourage backsliders not to despair but to return to an all-merciful and all-forgiving God.

17. Examination

When preaching on the internal marks of a true Christian, the preacher will impress on his hearers the need to examine their own hearts to discover whether they have these marks. He will perhaps describe how a true Christian thinks and feels in certain situations and then contrast this with unbelievers.

Scriptural Example

In Luke 6:20-26 the Lord describes the blessed identifying marks of the true Christian, and then contrasts this with the characteristics of the unbeliever.

Sermon Example

In a sermon on "The joy of the Lord is your strength" (Neh.8:10), a preacher distinguished the joy of the Christian from the joy of the non-Christian by examining the object of each joy, the nature of each joy, the duration of each joy, and the end of each joy. Hearers were encouraged to search their own hearts to see which joy was their "strength".

18. Reconciliation

One important part of sermon application is to reconcile the truth of the preaching passage with modern science, with human experience, or even with the rest of Scripture.

Scriptural Example

In Romans 9, the Apostle shows that the doctrine of human responsibility is not incompatible with divine sovereignty (Rom.9:19-23).

Sermon Example

In a sermon on God's "leaving of Hezekiah" (2 Chron.32:31) a preacher showed how this was consistent with the promise that God will never leave nor forsake his people (Heb.13:5). He showed how the leaving was not objective but subjective, not in fact but only in feeling.

19. Anticipation

Many Scriptures were clearly intended by God to anticipate Christ's person and work. They may have a primary reference to Israel and its experiences. However, subsequent Scripture show that they had a further and higher significance.

Scriptural Example

There is prophetic anticipation (Hosea 11:1/Matt.2:15), typological anticipation (Exodus 25/Heb.9:24), and analogical anticipation (Jonah 2/Matt.12:39-40). We shall look at these applications in more detail in Part 2 of this course when we look at specific Old Testament passages.

Sermon Example

No sermon on David would be complete without showing how his life and character anticipated and pointed towards the Son of David.

20. Modernisation

The Bible addressed the problems of an ancient people in ancient times. The preacher, therefore has to "modernise" when preaching on many passages. He must find out what the people were like and then find out the reason for the message God gave them – what problem was being addressed, etc. Having done that, the preacher can then deduce a timeless principle for modern application.

Scriptural Example

In Deuteronomy 25:4, Moses instructed the children of Israel to allow the ox that is treading the corn to eat of the corn as it does so. In 1 Cor.9:9 and 1 Tim.5:18 the Apostle took the principle behind the verse – the one who labours should be supported by those his labours benefit – and used it to justify preachers of the Gospel being supported by the givings of the people they minister to.

Sermon Example

"Divers weights *are* an abomination unto the LORD; and a false balance *is* not good" (Prov.20:23). Although few Christians use balances and weights in their daily lives today, a preacher took this text, extracted the principle of fairness and justice in both buying and selling, and on the basis of it exhorted present-day Christians to honesty, fairness, and truthfulness, both in business life and personal life.

CONCLUSION

There are many complicated books on preaching which make the process of application so convoluted that many preachers are giving up on trying to apply the Word, or feel inhibited from applying it to its full extent. However, if God gives us Scriptural warrant for our methods of application, it really does not matter what the Academics and Professors say in opposition. Let the Word of God free you to apply it with life-changing power to your hearers.