

## Learning the Art of Sermon Application

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After 15 years of preaching, application is still one of the trickiest parts of sermon writing. Why?

I struggled early on because seminary equipped me well for exegesis and interpretation, but not as well for Bible application. That's why we have the stereotype of the fresh-out-of-seminary pastor whose sermons sound more like a Bible commentary and less like a word from God. And speaking of commentaries, they seem to provide infrequent help in applying the text. They tend to serve us best by addressing interpretive issues.

Perhaps application will always elude us somewhat because there's something live and dynamic about it. Application deals with how God's timeless message speaks *now*, and now is always changing. Or maybe the difficulty lies in the fact that exegesis is more the science part of sermon writing, and application is more the art. And as an art it will always be a bit nebulous.

Whatever the reason, we struggle to do good application, and as a result one of the common beefs people have about church is that they don't understand how the sermon relates to real life. No wonder pastors get tempted to jettison expository preaching and instead primarily address topics that people deem pertinent.



### Ear for Application

Over the years, I have come to believe that developing good application actually works a lot like doing good exegesis. Both arise from asking good questions of the text. Both exegesis and also application involve intentional listening to the passage by bombarding it with questions. In exegesis we're ultimately asking, "What does this passage mean? What is its main point?" And in application we're asking, "How does the original message of this text apply today?"

Below I've listed application questions I regularly ask of a text. I've cobbled together this list out of insights gleaned from books, articles, professors, and other preachers over the years. I encourage you to glean from my gleanings and develop your own pattern of actively listening for application. Here are seven questions to ask while puzzling out what your passage means today.

#### 1. What's the main point?

Solid exegesis tees up effective application. The more accurately and clearly you can nail down the main point of the text, the better prepared you will be to press that meaning home to your hearers.

So as the first step in application, write out the main idea of the text in one sentence. I practice this discipline every week, and it's one of the most important steps in sermon writing for me (see Haddon Robinson's "exegetical idea" of a passage and then transforming it into

a "homiletical idea" in [Biblical Preaching](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, 66-99). If you're not super clear on the central theme of the text, how do you expect to make textually legitimate, searching applications to peoples' lives? It's hard to hit a target with a warped arrow.

## **2. How did this text apply back then?**

Based on that same exegetical spadework, ask how your text applied in its original context. Was it originally a command to be obeyed, a praise to be sung, or a promise to be trusted? Does the passage reveal truths that should be believed or warnings that should be heeded? Do the characters in the text exemplify either righteousness to emulate or sin to avoid?

Of course God's word to them is not always God's word to us in exactly the same way. The original application must pass through the filters of biblical theology, a right understanding of the covenants, and considerations of cultural specificity. But if you can identify the species of the original application, then your present-day application should at least be in the same genus.

If your application grows organically from the soil of your passage, it will ring true with your congregation. They will know that the Word of God itself, and not just the cleverness of the preacher, is pricking their hearts.

## **3. How might this text address different categories of listeners?**

Try applying the text like the Puritans did (for example, see William Perkins, [Art of Prophesying](#) <sup>[3]</sup>). Think about the spiritual taxonomy of people hearing the sermon and how the text might speak to each of those groups. What does your passage say to unbelievers? To believers? Does it address specific types of people like fathers, children, women, the rich, religious leaders, rulers, the depressed, the hot-tempered, or the fearful?

You can take this a step further by contrasting what the Bible says to each group with what the culture says to each group. How are the text's implications for marriage or money or happiness different from the current conventional wisdom? Any time I can contrast a biblical approach to worldly approaches, the light bulbs start going off for people.

## **4. How does this text shape the church?**

Change your perspective and stare at the passage wearing wide-angle lenses to see how it applies to your congregation as a whole, and not just to individuals. We suffer from an individualistic, self-focused orientation (at least here in the United States). As a result, we instinctively think of relevance in personal terms. We ask, "What does this text mean for *me*?" but fail to ponder what it means for *us*. And yet so much of the Bible is written to God's gathered people, whether Israel or local churches.

The people in my church seem to perk up when I apply the text to congregational life. It sounds fresh and revolutionary to our individualistic ears. So don't be afraid to tell people, "This is how our church should look because of this text." American churches so often suffer from terribly anemic, pragmatic ecclesiologies. So amaze your members with how much God's Word has to say to the local church by making corporate applications week after week.

## **5. What objections might a skeptic raise?**

Where would a skeptic get stuck in your passage? Would she get hooked by an exclusive truth claim, or a vivid description of God's wrath, or a rigorous moral demand? Consider taking a minute in a sermon to address doubts endemic to your culture. I'm not suggesting that we turn sermons into apologetic lectures. But apologetic comments can be a kind of application because they address the questions people have.

I've been helped by Tim Keller's list of "[Defeater Beliefs](#)" <sup>[4]</sup> in analyzing a given scripture for hot-button issues.

## **6. How can I preach the gospel from this passage?**

Always preach the gospel in every sermon. The gospel is the central message of the Bible, so all faithful expository preaching should include an application of the gospel to the people. Let's strive to be like Paul, who could summarize his preaching by saying, "We preach Christ crucified" (1 Corinthians 1:23).

Where is the gospel in your text? Where do you see the holiness of God and his glory on display? How does sin against that holy God manifest itself? Bryan Chapell calls this the "fallen condition focus" ([Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon](#) <sup>[5]</sup>, pp. 40-44). Use the glimpses of sin afforded by your text as a mirror to show people that they are indeed rebels who need gospel amnesty. And of course, take people to Jesus and his cross from the passage at hand. Be like Charles Spurgeon who said, "I take my text and make a bee-line to the cross."

## **7. How does this text help me know and worship God?**

Finally, show the people God and his glory in every sermon. When you go off on God's character during a sermon, it triggers a reflex of worship and wonder in the heart of believers. Relevance erupts in the pews as hearts treasure Jesus himself, shining through the pages of Scripture.

### **Heart of Application**

I'm sure there are other helpful application questions to ask. In fact, I invite readers to share their approaches. Let's redeem the comment section below by developing a best practices thread.

But whatever process you use to listen to and apply the text, remember to aim for the heart. Reach the heart and you reach the whole person.

And don't neglect your own heart. When you're filled with love for your people, application becomes natural and instinctive. The questions listed above are tools that work best when wielded by a shepherd who cares deeply for his sheep. Love is the best fuel for the labor of application. So love your people deeply, apply the text fearlessly and precisely, shout out the gospel weekly, burn publicly with wonder at God's glory, and the last thing your people will be wondering is how the Bible is relevant.

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[3] *Art of Prophesying*:

[http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/perkins\\_propheying.html#chapter7](http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/perkins_propheying.html#chapter7)

[4] Defeater Beliefs: <http://cultivate.goodsoil.com/files/24366-Deconstructing-Defeater-Beliefs.pdf>

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