

## Preach to the Ignorant, the Doubtful, and Sinners



By *Mark Dever*

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I often hear the question, "how do you *apply* the text in an expositional sermon?"

Behind this question may be many questionable assumptions. The questioner may be remembering "expositional" sermons he has heard (or maybe preached) that were no different from some Bible lectures at seminary—well-structured and accurate but demonstrating little godly urgency or pastoral wisdom. These expositional sermons may have had little if any application. On the other hand, the questioner may simply not know how to recognize application when he hears it.

William Perkins, the great sixteenth-century puritan theologian in Cambridge, instructed preachers to imagine the various kinds of hearers and to think through applications for each—hardened sinners, questioning doubters, weary saints, young enthusiasts, and so on.

Perkins' advice is very helpful, but hopefully we do that already. I want to approach the topic of application slightly differently: not only are there different kinds of hearers, there are also different kinds of application. As we take a passage of God's Word and explain it clearly, compellingly, even urgently, there are at least three different kinds of application which reflect three different kinds of problems encountered in the Christian pilgrimage. First, we struggle under the blight of ignorance. Second, we wrestle with doubt, often more than we at first realize. Third, we still struggle with sin—whether through direct disobedient acts or through sinful negligence. As preachers, we long to see changes in all three ways, both in ourselves and in our hearers every time we preach God's Word. And all three problems give rise to a different kind of legitimate application.

### IGNORANCE

Ignorance is a fundamental problem in a fallen world. We have alienated God from us. We have cut ourselves off from direct fellowship with our Creator. It is not surprising, then, that *informing* people of the truth about God is itself a powerful type of application—and one that we desperately need.

This is not an excuse for cold or passionless sermons. I can be every bit as excited (and more) by indicative statements as I can be by imperative commands. The commands of the gospel to repent and believe mean nothing apart from the indicative statements concerning God, ourselves, and Christ. Information is vital. We are called to teach the truth and to proclaim a great message about God. We want people who hear our messages to move from being ignorant to being knowledgeable about the truth. Such heartfelt informing is application.

### DOUBT

Doubt is different from ignorance. In doubt, we take ideas or truths familiar to us and we question them. This kind of questioning is not rare among Christians. In fact, doubt may be one of the most important issues to be thoughtfully explored and thoroughly challenged in our preaching. Addressing doubt is not something a preacher takes up with non-believers for a

little pre-conversion apologetics. Some people who sit listening to sermons week after week may well know all the facts that the preacher mentions about Christ, or God, or Onesimus; but they may well have struggled with whether or not they really believe those facts are true. Sometimes people may not even be aware of their doubts, much less be able to articulate them as doubts.

But when we begin to consider Scripture searchingly, we find lingering in the shadows questions, uncertainties, and hesitations, all of which make us sadly aware of that gravitational pull of doubt off there in the distance drawing us away from the faithful pilgrim's path. To such people—perhaps to such parts of our own hearts—we want to argue for and to urge the truthfulness of God's Word and the urgency of believing it. We are called to urge on hearers the truthfulness of God's Word. We want people who hear our messages to change from doubt to full-hearted belief in the truth. Such urgent, searching preaching of the truth is application.

## **SIN**

Sin, too, is a problem in this fallen world. Ignorance and doubt may be themselves specific sins, the result of specific sins, or neither. But sin is certainly more than neglect or doubt.

Be assured that people listening to your sermons will have struggled with disobeying God in the week just passed, and they will almost certainly struggle with disobeying him in the week that they are just beginning. The sins will be various. Some will be a disobedience of action; others will be a disobedience of inaction. But whether of commission or omission, sins are disobedience to God.

Part of preaching is to challenge God's people to a holiness of life that will reflect the holiness of God himself. So part of applying the passage of Scripture is to draw out the implications of that passage for our actions this week. We as preachers are called to exhort God's people to obedience to his Word. We want our hearers to change from sinful disobedience to joyful, glad obedience to God according to his will as revealed in his Word. Such exhortation to obedience is certainly application.

## **THE GOSPEL**

The main message that we need to apply every time we preach is the gospel. Some people do not yet know the good news of Jesus Christ. And some of them may have even been sitting under your preaching for a time—distracted or asleep or day-dreaming or otherwise not paying attention. They need to be informed of the gospel. They need to be told.

Others may have heard, understood, and perhaps even accepted the truth, but now find themselves struggling with doubting the very matters you are addressing (or assuming) in your message. Such people need to be urged to believe the truth of the good news of Christ.

And, also, people may have heard and understood, but remain slow to repent of their sins. They may even accept the truth of the gospel message, but not want to give up their sins and trust in Christ. For such hearers, the most powerful application you can make is to exhort them to hate their sins and flee to Christ. In all our sermons, we should seek to apply the gospel by informing, urging, and exhorting.

One common challenge we preachers face in applying God's Word in our sermons is that individuals who experience problems in one pronounced area will think that you are not applying Scripture in your preaching because you are not addressing their particular problem. Are they right? Not necessarily. While your preaching might improve if you start addressing every category more often or more thoroughly, it is not wrong for you to preach to those who need to be informed or who need to be exhorted to forsake sin, even if the person talking to you isn't so aware of that need.

One final note. [Proverbs 23:12](#) says, "Apply your heart to instruction and your ears to words of knowledge." In English translations, it seems that the words translated "apply" in the Bible almost always (maybe always?) have reference not to the preacher's work (as homiletics teaches us) nor even to the Holy Spirit's (as systematics rightly teaches us) but to the work of

the one who hears the Word. We are called to apply the word to our own hearts, and to apply ourselves to that work.

That, perhaps, is the single most important application we could make next Sunday for the benefit of all of God's people.

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May/June 2007

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