

Chapter 7

**APPLYING  
GOD'S WORD  
TO YOUR LIFE**

## Real Life

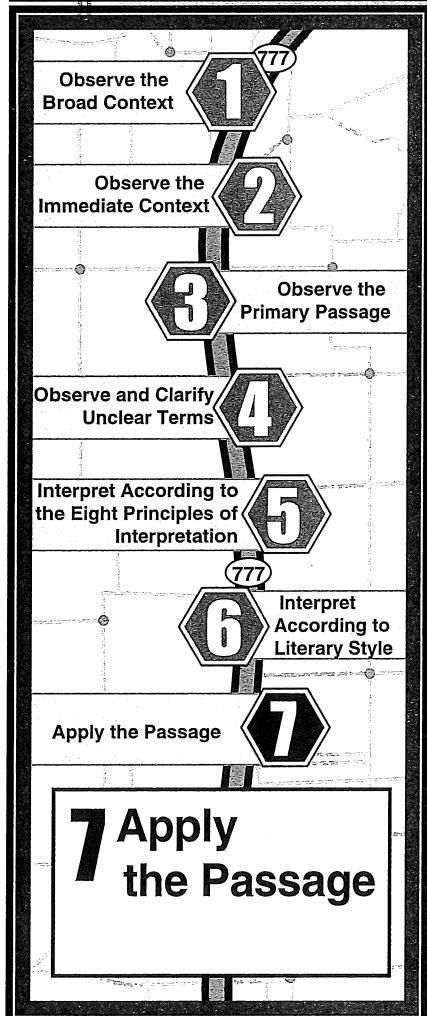
Rob leaned back in his chair and looked at his wife. “Well, that was more work than I thought it would be, but at the same time I feel like I understand the Bible so much better.”

Becky nodded and laughed, “Yeah, finding an adequate explanation for Galatians 3:28 reminded me of when you put in that ceiling fan last summer—one thing led to another and the next thing you know we’re replacing wire, framing out the ceiling joists, and repainting the ceiling—all for one little fan. Everything was intertwined. It was kind of like that in studying this passage. In order to make sense of one component of it, we needed to make sense of another, and on it went. Yet now that we’re done, I have a new appreciation for how the Bible fits together as a whole.”

“Ah, but we’re not done yet,” Rob said. “We need to apply what we’ve learned to our lives. How is all of this going to make us different? Somehow I don’t think we’re just supposed to read the Bible without doing anything about it.”

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### YOU ARE HERE



### STEP SEVEN: APPLY THE PASSAGE

Now it is time to move on to the final critical step of Bible study—application. It is not enough to simply study the Bible in order to gain head knowledge. The apostle James, in James 1:22 admonishes us to “be doers of the Word, and not hearers only” lest we deceive ourselves. He goes on to compare the one who merely listens to the Word to be like a man who looks in a mirror and then immediately forgets what he looks like. Application must follow interpretation. Without obedience to the Word of God, its life-giving power will lay dormant in our hearts. God has not given us His Word in order that we might become the next Bible trivia champion, but rather that we might be conformed to His image.

As we move forward in our discussion of application, it is important to distinguish application from interpretation. Interpretation seeks to answer the question, “What?”—What was the author’s original intent? What did this passage mean to its original audience? The application stage on the other hand seeks to answer the question, “So what?”—How does this affect my life? How should I live in light of what I’ve read? Application puts the “rubber to the road.”

The goal of all application is two-fold: most significantly, we look to Scripture in order that we might better know and love God. The second goal is related to the first—we earnestly study Scripture in order to be conformed to the image of Christ. In order to help us better understand these two goals of application, we will look at seven basic principles of application.

## Principle 1: Increased worship and adoration is a valid application of the text.

We live in a world that puts a premium on accomplishment and activity. As we seek to apply Scripture to our lives, it is proper and right that we constantly allow it to shape our actions. Yet our relationship with God does not consist entirely of “doing.” He loves us, and just like in any love relationship, our relationship with God consists also in relating. The Bible likens our relationship to God as that of a father to his child and a husband to his wife. Certainly these types of relationships exist for more than mere activity—they also involve affections and attitudes of the heart. God would have us *know* Him, not merely *serve* Him. Perhaps the classic biblical illustration of the dichotomy between “doing” and “relating” can be found in Luke 10:38-42.

1 Read Luke 10:38-42. Why do you think that Mary’s response to Jesus was more pleasing to him than Martha’s response?

It is clear that Jesus would have us work for Him. Throughout the New Testament we are instructed about the ways we should behave toward God, ourselves, and others. Yet we must not forget that the proper ground for all obedience is a heart of love toward God. God does not ask us to serve Him because He is in need of us, but rather that through our service to Him we might catch a clearer glimpse of who He is. Therefore, when seeking to apply the Bible to our lives, we may find that instead of feeling a need to do something with our bodies, we may instead be compelled to do something with our hearts—to love Christ more deeply, to trust in God more fully, or to be more confident of His love for us. Many portions of Scripture were given for just this reason.

“THE WORD OF GOD WELL UNDERSTOOD AND RELIGIOUSLY OBEYED IS THE SHORTEST ROUTE TO SPIRITUAL PERFECTION. AND WE MUST NOT SELECT A FEW FAVORITE PASSAGES TO THE EXCLUSION OF OTHERS. NOTHING LESS THAN A WHOLE BIBLE CAN MAKE A WHOLE CHRISTIAN.”

A.W. TOZER

2 Read Exodus 34:5-8. How does Moses respond to this revelation of God?

Remember, the primary point of Scripture is that through it we might meet with God—to encounter Him in unique and personal ways. If reading a passage of Scripture causes you to grow in your love for Him, then rest assured that you have applied that passage to your life. To be sure, you may then respond to God through an act of your will. Love in the heart will always translate into action of the will. But a renewed heart of worship for God is itself a legitimate application of God’s Word. Sometimes, He just wants us to love Him more.

## Principle 2: The Holy Spirit’s work of illumination will not be contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture.

As we seek to order our lives by the commands of Scripture, we must be careful that we do not misunderstand the Holy Spirit’s work of illumination in our hearts. As discussed in Chap-

ter 2, God has given us the Holy Spirit in order to bridge the gap between our limited, fallen minds and His complete "otherness." Spiritual truth, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:6-16, cannot be discerned by the natural mind; it must be revealed to us by the Spirit of God. Yet we must bear in mind that the Holy Spirit's work of illumination will always be consistent with the authorial intent of a passage and the clear teaching of all Scripture.

"ONE OF THESE DAYS SOME SIMPLE SOUL WILL PICK UP THE BOOK OF GOD, READ IT, AND BELIEVE IT. THEN THE REST OF US WILL BE EMBARRASSED."

LEONARD RAVENHILL

**3** Read Ephesians 4:2-3. How would you respond to a pastor who claimed that through this verse the Holy Spirit was telling him to ignore the adulterous relationship taking place between two staff members of his church?

Such "illumination" is clearly not of the Holy Spirit. Paul's comments in Ephesians 4:2-3 are directed toward minor personality differences and the tensions that come through interpersonal relationships. He is not intending that the elders of Ephesus sweep sin under the rug. In 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 Paul gives very clear instructions about how a congregation should deal with unrepentant immorality. The God who inspired Paul's words in 1 Corinthians would not refute Himself through a later special illumination. Whenever we sense that God has revealed Himself (or His truth) to us through His Word, we must make sure that it is consistent with the authorial intent of the passage and in harmony with the clear teaching of Scripture.

### **Principle 3: The Old Testament moral ethics are binding unless they are specifically overturned in the New Testament.**

One of the most important factors in arriving at correct application is properly understanding the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. Anyone who has read even a little of the Mosaic Law will quickly realize that Christians no longer adhere to all the rules that Moses gave to the nation of Israel. The dietary laws, sacrificial ordinances, and certain familial obligations (Deuteronomy 25:5-10) are no longer embraced. Yet we still adhere to the Ten Commandments, and our ethics regarding sexual immorality are built almost entirely on Old Testament passages such as Leviticus 18.

Why do we apply some of the Old Testament laws and not others? In order to answer this question, we need to have a basic understanding of the purpose of the Mosaic Law. In Galatians 3:23-25, the apostle Paul likened the Law to a "tutor" or guardian that helped to preserve obedience in the people of God until the coming of Christ and the regeneration of the Holy Spirit. In New Testament times, a tutor was a hired person or slave who protected, guarded, taught and led the children of the family until they were no longer in need of his services. He acted as a sort of surrogate parent. Many of the principles the tutor taught the children under his charge were lifelong principles such as "don't murder," "don't steal," and "respect authority." Other principles were temporary and specific to the development of the child such as "don't talk to strangers," "go to bed at sunset," and "do your studies before you play." The former principles were meant to last into adulthood, but the latter rules were only temporary. As the children reached the maturity of adulthood and received their legal rights of sonship, they no longer

needed such rules. If the tutor did his job correctly, he reached a point when he was no longer necessary, having brought the children to a place of maturity and independence.

In the same way Paul says the Law acted as a restraining and mentoring influence in the life of the nation of Israel. The commands and regulations God gave Moses helped to preserve the people from the pagan idolatry that surrounded the people of God. Just as a tutor served only a temporary purpose, so too the Law served only a temporary function. According to Galatians 4:1-7, the indwelling presence of the Spirit marked the beginning of “adulthood” for the people of God, rendering the authority of the Law in the life of a Christian no longer necessary. The internal dwelling of the Spirit has replaced the external written Law as the guardian and guide of our lives.<sup>10</sup> The giving of the Holy Spirit explains why the authority of the Law is no longer binding. Many of the principles that God gave to His people through the Law transcend the Law itself, much like the enduring principles that a tutor would give to his children. But like the temporary rules of a tutor, many of the rules given through the Law are no longer necessary.

But how do we know which aspects of the Old Testament Law are perpetually binding and which were only temporary? Many scholars helpfully divide the Old Testament Law into three subcategories: moral, civil, and ceremonial. Each of these areas governed a different aspect of the lives of the Israelites. When we examine the New Testament we find that the civil and ceremonial regulations are no longer binding. The coming of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit have rendered these aspects of the Law obsolete. (This can be seen in Acts 11 where Peter is commanded by God to eat foods that were once considered unclean, as well as Acts 15, where the Jerusalem council ruled that gentile Christians should not be burdened with the requirements of the Law.) Yet the moral obligations of the Law (expressed perhaps most clearly in the Ten Commandments) remain binding upon the people of God. As we examine the New Testament, we find that the moral law is in fact upheld and often expanded in the New Testament. In summary, the New Testament serves as our guide for deciding which commands of the Old Testament still apply to today’s context.

**4** Examine the Old Testament passages below and their New Testament counterparts. Are the Old Testament regulations in these passages overturned, upheld, or expanded? If so, how?

Old Testament	New Testament	Law Overturned, Upheld, or Expanded?
Leviticus 4:27-31	Hebrews 10:11-14	
Leviticus 19:18	Matthew 5:43-48	
Exodus 20:13	Matthew 5:21-22	
Exodus 20:14	Matthew 5:27-28	

Just because a Scriptural injunction in the Old Testament has been overturned by the New Testament doesn't mean that it has no application to our lives. The key to application in such situations is the subject of the next two application principles.

## **Principle 4: Find ways to transfer the substance of cultural commands to your contemporary situation.**

"YOU MAY AS WELL QUIT  
READING AND HEARING THE  
WORD OF GOD, AND GIVE IT  
TO THE DEVIL, IF YOU DO NOT  
DESIRE TO LIVE ACCORDING  
TO IT."

MARTIN LUTHER

Much of the Bible was written to a specific audience at a specific point in time. Consequently, many of the commands within Scripture are only directly applicable to the culture of the original audience. For example, in 1 Corinthians 16:20 Paul commands the church to "greet one another with a holy kiss." While this is a clear command by Paul, few Christians in our North American context greet one another with a kiss. Such a practice is simply not part of our culture. What then, are we to make of Paul's command? Do we simply ignore it? Not so. When we encounter a

command that is intricately connected to a particular culture, we should look for the underlying principle that governs the command and then seek to express that same principle in ways that are appropriate to our culture. In the case above, many western Christians have simply substituted a "holy handshake" for the "holy kiss." In western culture, a handshake communicates the same basic idea as a kiss would have done in Paul's culture.

Knowing how to "bridge the gap" between the culture(s) of the New Testament and ours is not always easy. How can we be sure that our modern application is faithful to the underlying principle of the original command? When working through this type of situation, there are three basic steps to follow.<sup>11</sup>

### **Step 1: Determine the original meaning of the command.**

In attempting to bridge the gap between the culture(s) of the Bible and ours, we must first seek to understand how those living in the original culture would have understood the command. There may be some interpretive work that needs to be done at this stage, as the original meaning of the Scriptural command may not be obvious.

**5** Read Leviticus 19:9-10. How would the original audience have applied this command?

At this point we need not worry about how to apply the passage. We simply want to know what it would have meant to the original audience. In Old Testament times, gleaning—picking up grain that the reapers had missed—was a common practice among the poor. As there was no governmental welfare, it was the responsibility of landowners to leave a little grain behind in their fields in order that the poor might be fed. The command itself is quite clear: Leave some of the grain in your field so that it can be gathered by the poor.

### Step 2: Find the principle behind the command.

The next step in bridging the gap is to find the underlying principle that governs the command. God does not command us to do things simply for the sake of doing. His commands always relate to His nature and purposes. He commands us to love because He is a God of love; He commands us to show mercy because He is a God of mercy; He commands us to be holy because He is a God of holiness. He is not so much interested in us “doing the deed” as He is in our hearts being in tune with His own.

**6** Look again at Leviticus 19:9-10. What is the central principle behind this command? What does this command reveal about God’s heart?

This passage clearly emphasizes God’s concern that His people take care of the poor and the oppressed. It also implicitly warns against greediness on the part of those who are wealthy.

### Step 3: Apply the principle in ways that are appropriate to today’s culture.

Once we have a solid understanding of the command in its original context and have understood the underlying principle that governs it, it is time to find a means of expressing that principle in a way that is appropriate to today’s culture.

**7** Look again at our passage in Leviticus 19. How would you apply the passage to your daily life?

“SPOUTING SCRIPTURE HAS NO MAGIC TO DISPEL THE DEVIL. SCRIPTURE HAS PHENOMENAL POWER BUT UNLESS YOU SUBMIT YOUR MIND TO ITS INERRANT TRUTH, ITS POWER IS LARGELY LOST TO YOU.”

MARTHA KILPATRICK

While most Christians are not farmers (and the Old Testament practice of “gleaning” might be considered stealing in our culture), the underlying biblical principle of taking care of the poor still has application for today. Though we may not express our concern for the poor in the exact way prescribed by Leviticus 19:9-10, we can still set aside portions of our income to assist those less fortunate than us. The best way to test the legitimacy of our application is to compare our conclusion with the rest of Scripture. If the application we have come up with runs counter to the clear teaching of Scripture we can rest assured that our application is inappropriate. In this case, James 1:27-2:6 and 2 Corinthians 8-9 both affirm our application of Leviticus 19:9-10.

### Principle 5: A command which is based on an abiding principle should not be seen as merely cultural.

Yet how do we know which commands in Scripture should be substituted with a contemporary application? We have already discussed the application of Old Testament passages, but what about commands within the New Testament? One of the greatest challenges fac-



ing the interpreter of the Bible is knowing which commands are to be applied directly, and which commands are connected to the culture of that day and thus should only be applied in principle. Too often we allow our personal preferences to play a deciding role in this matter. Those commands which we find offensive or unattractive we quickly label “cultural” and thus excuse ourselves from having to apply them.

A basic rule for deciding which commands are culturally bound is as follows: if a command is based upon an abiding principle it should not be seen as only culturally binding. Abiding principles are larger, universal principles that reach across time periods and cultures. An abiding principle is one that is true for all people, at all times, for all circumstances. Because abiding principles are universal in nature, any command that is based on them should also be seen as being universal.

**8** Read 1 Corinthians 6:1-8. What is the situation that is being addressed?

**9** What is Paul’s admonition about taking a fellow believer to court?

**10** Upon what principle does Paul base this admonition?

**11** Should Paul’s command be applied directly, or is it only culturally relevant?

Paul grounds his injunction regarding lawsuits in the fact that we as believers will one day judge the world and angels. We who will have such high responsibilities in the future, Paul reasons, should be qualified in the present to judge the temporal things of this world. Since Paul’s logic draws upon an enduring principle (i.e., that we will judge angels and the world) his command regarding lawsuits is likewise enduring.

## **Principle 6: Biblical narratives should be used primarily to illustrate biblical principles.**

Much of the Bible is written in the literary genre of narrative. Narrative literature is perhaps the easiest to read, but we must use discernment and caution when attempting to apply it. Biblical narratives should not be used primarily to *establish* biblical principles, but rather to *illustrate* biblical principles. When considering narrative literature in the Bible, it is important to make a distinction between “descriptive” and “prescriptive” portions of Scripture. Descrip-



tive literature merely describes what occurred (David killed Goliath, Jesus walked on water, etc). On the other hand, prescriptive literature prescribes an action (Christ's commands in the Sermon on the Mount, Paul's commands regarding sexual morality). Narrative literature is almost entirely descriptive. When applying narrative literature, we must not incorrectly prescribe a point of application that is not present in the text.

## 12 Read Mark 2:1-5. What are some possible misapplications of this text?

A narrative passage such as the one above could be interpreted in any number of misguided ways. For instance, consider the following three applications from this passage: 1) We must know clearly what we want, 2) We must not let anyone stand in the way of getting what we want, and 3) We must be willing to do whatever is necessary to get what we want (even if this involves destroying personal property). Certainly such applications are rather far-fetched abuses of this passage, but they illustrate the dangers of attempting to derive application from a narrative passage.

If we're careful, narrative passages can be made to say virtually anything and everything. Much like allegorical interpretation, attempting to draw biblical principles from a narrative passage opens the text to the possibility of abuse. Because of this, it is better to view the narrative passages of the Bible as *illustrations* of clear biblical principles, rather than looking to them to *establish* biblical principles. When we begin by drawing principles from the clear teaching of Scripture, we can then feel comfortable about finding these principles in the narrative passages of Scripture.

### Principle 7: Ask five basic application questions.

As you consider how a passage applies to your life, it is often helpful to consider five basic questions. These questions address the five central elements of the Christian faith: our actions, our sin, our being (who we are), our calling, and our faith. As you reflect on a particular passage of Scripture, it might be helpful for you to come up with your own application questions.

1. Does this passage address what I should do? According to this passage, what is my duty?
2. Does this passage address a sin I need to repent of? According to this passage is there a sinful action or attitude that I need to lay aside?
3. Does this passage address who I should be? According to this passage, how can I become the person of character this passage speaks about?
4. Does this passage address goals that I should pursue? According to this passage, what causes should I devote my life to?
5. Does this passage address a truth that I should believe? According to this passage, how should I direct my faith?

## CONCLUSION

God has given us His Word that we might both know and love Him. Through the Bible we see a picture of who He is and learn how to order our lives in accordance with His nature and purposes. This study has been an attempt to encourage and equip us in personal Bible study, in order that we might more confidently make use of this great tool that God has given us. May the Spirit of God draw us to Himself as we seek Him in His Word!