

CFBC Hermeneutics- Application

We teach that, whereas there may be several applications of any given passage of Scripture, there is but one true interpretation. The meaning of Scripture is to be found as one diligently applies the literal grammatical-historical method of interpretation under the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit (John 7:17; 16:12-15; 1 Corinthians 2:7-15; 1 John 2:20). It is the responsibility of believers to ascertain carefully the true intent and meaning of Scripture, recognizing that proper application is binding on all generations.

Excerpt from What We Teach

“Doctrine is only the drawing of the bow; application is hitting the mark.”

Thomas Manton

Excerpts from Michael Vlach on “Application”..

- **Context...What is the setting of the text?**
- **Observation- What does the text say?**
- **Interpretation- What does the text mean by what it says?**
- **Application- What does the meaning of the text require of me?**

Why do so Many People Avoid Application?

1. Some are satisfied to simply discover the meaning of the passage but go no further.
2. Superficial application is preferred over substantive, life changing submission to God’s Word and application.

3. That which is most convicting tends to be that which is most avoided.
4. That which brings about the greatest emotional response is valued above that which brings about true change in will or character.

James 1...

22 But *prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.* **23** For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; **24** for *once* he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. **25** But *one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.*

Important...As we study application, we need to take the time to delineate between “Descriptive” and “Prescriptive” passages.

Distinguishing Between the Descriptive and the Prescriptive...

Let's define descriptive texts and prescriptive texts.

- **Descriptive texts:** Portions of Scripture which contain descriptions of events that took place or commands issued to specific individuals or people groups.
- **Prescriptive texts: (Normative)** Portions of Scripture which contain teachings, commands, or directions which are extended in their direct application to all people and places universally.

Note- There are often prescriptive elements in descriptive passages. The careful student of God's word will be attune to prescriptive principles which can be observed in these descriptive passages.

How do we distinguish between the two?

The best way to determine this is by looking at the following:

1. The context of the passage- This may limit the audience thus limit the application.
2. Other biblical teachings or subsequent revelation– These may limit or change application.

Roy Zuck on Descriptive and Prescriptive Passages of Scripture..

“When studying the Bible, it is important to determine whether the verse or passage at hand is descriptive or prescriptive. The difference is this: *a passage is descriptive if it is simply describing something that happened, while a passage is prescriptive if it is specifically teaching that something should happen. Simply put, is it a description or a command? Is the passage describing something (it happened) or is it prescribing something (it should happen)? The difference is important. When a biblical passage is only describing something but is interpreted as prescribing something, it can lead to errant thinking and behavior.*

Take the story of David and Goliath, for example. Goliath was blaspheming the God of Israel and mocking God’s people, and David fought him with a sling and a stone, killed him, and cut off his head (1 Samuel 17). If we take this passage as descriptive (which it is), then there are many things we can learn from the history, such as the value of trusting God. However, if we take 1 Samuel 17 as prescriptive (which it’s not), then we might make the error of slinging rocks at blasphemers everywhere. The Bible relates the account of David’s victory for our edification, but the Bible never commands us to follow his actions on the battlefield.

A less dramatic example of the descriptive vs. prescriptive issue concerns how the New Testament describes the early Christians meeting in homes (Acts 2:46; 20:20; Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15). Some interpret this to mean that Christians today should only meet in homes, and, therefore, meeting in church buildings is wrong. This is errant thinking. None of the passages that describe believers meeting at home prescribe that believers only meet in homes. In fact, the New Testament nowhere instructs believers to meet in homes. The Bible describes believers meeting in homes, but there is no command to do so. So, meeting in homes is allowable, but it is not advocated or even necessarily preferred.

Another example of the importance of descriptive vs. prescriptive passages concerns the question of how often communion should be observed. From Scripture, it appears that the early Christians observed the Lord's Supper weekly (Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:20–25). Yet none of the passages that describe the Lord's Supper being observed weekly actually prescribe that it be observed weekly. Can the Lord's Supper be observed weekly? Absolutely. Must the Lord's Supper be observed weekly? No.

The gift of tongues is another area in which it is important to separate descriptive from prescriptive passages. The book of Acts gives us several instances of people speaking in tongues, such as Acts 2:4, "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them." Some take this and other passages describing tongues and assume they are prescriptive, but this is a wrong interpretation. The Bible describes certain occasions when Spirit-filled people spoke in tongues, but the descriptions of what happened should not be confused with commands to make it happen. The Bible certainly commands us to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), but nowhere does it say that speaking in tongues always accompanies the filling, and neither does it mandate speaking in tongues for everyone.

As a general rule, much of what occurs in the book of Acts is descriptive, while much of what is said in the New Testament Epistles is prescriptive. Acts is history, and the Epistles are instruction. There are exceptions, of course. The book of Acts sometimes prescribes, and the Epistles sometimes describe.

If a verse or passage is simply describing something, with nothing said in the positive or negative about that something, then it is descriptive and should not be considered something we are commanded to do. It is only when Scripture specifically instructs (prescribes) that New Testament believers do something that we are to take it as a command to obey.

Putting it all Into Practice

Questions to ask to help us determine how to respond to the message of the text...

- Is there a truth to believe about God?
- Is there a truth to believe about some other doctrine? o Is there a command to obey?
- Is there a promise to claim?
- Is there an example to follow?
- Is there an error in behavior to avoid?
- Is there an error in thinking to avoid?
- Is there a condition to meet?
- Is there a principle to follow for personal guidance?
- Is there wisdom to shape a Christians thinking?
- Is there a prayer to pattern?

Summary Steps for Application...Important

1.) True application comes only when the student relies upon the guidance and illumination of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:14; Rom. 8:14; Gal. 5:18). The application process must therefore start with prayer.

2.) Biblical truth is not applied until it is believed and lived out. The student must always study Scripture in order to be transformed in his thinking and in his behavior.

3.) Resist the temptation to quickly flip to passages in order to find quick and easy answers. True application comes only after careful interpretation. To bypass the hard work of interpretation only results in misapplication and confusion.

- 4.) Determine if the text is directly applicable to you. Watch carefully for context and original recipients. This also requires a sensitivity to progressive revelation (be sure to examine what other passages in Scripture which deal with the same issue have to say).
- 5.) Make sure that thorough exegesis has taken place before moving to the application stage. If interpretation is done well, application will flow out naturally and easily. If not, a cloud of confusion may exist over how the meaning of the passage is to be applied.
- 6.) Application must be related to interpretation. Students sometimes show great diligence in interpreting a text, but then apply it in a way that is not in harmony with the text's meaning.
- 7.) It should be remembered that the application of a text should not go beyond what the text says. If a passage comments on an issue only to a point, do not press the application of that passage beyond that degree.
- 8.) Be careful to distinguish between that which is merely descriptive (that which merely describes an event, person, etc.) and that which is normative (that which is to be followed by all people everywhere). That David had several wives is a fact that Scripture records about David—it is not a principle to be followed by believers. However, God's command to Adam in Genesis 2:24, with respect to marriage is normative—that is, it is to be the guiding principle for believers in marriage.
- 9.) Applications should be made to one's life immediately. The longer change is avoided, the harder one will grow towards change.

Examples to consider...

Exodus 20...

Then God spoke all these words, saying,

2 "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

3 "You shall have no other gods before Me.

4 "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. **5** You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting

the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, **6** but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

7 “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.

8 “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. **9** Six days you shall labor and do all your work, **10** but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; *in it* you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. **11** For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

12 “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you.

13 “You shall not murder.

14 “You shall not commit adultery.

15 “You shall not steal.

16 “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

17 “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

Excerpt from Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 99. What rules are to be observed for the right understanding of the ten commandments?

A. For the right understanding of the ten commandments, these rules are to be observed:

That it is spiritual, and so reacheth the understanding, will, affections, and all other powers of the soul; as well as words, works, and gestures.

That as, where a duty is commanded, the contrary sin is forbidden; and, where a sin is forbidden the contrary duty is commanded: so, where a promise is annexed, the contrary threatening is included; and, where a threatening is annexed, the contrary promise is included.

Westminster Shorter Catechism on the Sixth Commandment...

Q. 68. ***What is required*** in the sixth commandment?

A. 68. The sixth commandment requireth all lawful endeavours to preserve our own life,(1) and the life of others.(2)

(1) Eph. 5:28-29.

(2) I Kings 18:4.

Q. 69. **What is forbidden** in the sixth commandment?

A. 69. The sixth commandment forbiddeth the taking away of our own life, or the life of our neighbour unjustly, or whatsoever tendeth thereunto.(1)

(1) Acts 16:28; Gen. 9:6.

Nehemiah 8...

8 And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel. **2** Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women and all who *could* listen with understanding, **on the first day of the seventh month. 3 He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday**, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and **all the people were attentive** to the book of the law. **4 Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose.** And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah *and* Meshullam on his left hand. **5** Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and **when he opened it, all the people stood up. 6** Then Ezra blessed the Lord the great God. And **all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.**

Psalm 93...

1 The Lord reigns, He is clothed with majesty;
The Lord has clothed and girded Himself with strength;
Indeed, the world is firmly established, it will not be moved.

2 Your throne is established from of old;
You are from everlasting.

3 The floods have lifted up, O Lord,
The floods have lifted up their voice,
The floods lift up their pounding waves.

4 More than the sounds of many waters,
Than the mighty breakers of the sea,
The Lord on high is mighty.

5 Your testimonies are fully confirmed;
Holiness befits Your house,
O Lord, forevermore.

Consider what this Psalm teaches us about God and His sovereign rule over all

Jeremiah 29...

10 “For thus says the Lord, ‘When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. **11** For ***I know the plans that I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.*** **12** Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. **13** You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. **14** I will be found by you,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.’

Jeremiah 38...

17 Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “Thus says the Lord God of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘If you will indeed go out to the officers of the king of Babylon, then you will live, this city will not be burned with fire, and you and your household will survive. **18** But if you will not go out to the officers of the king of Babylon, then this city will be given over to the hand of the Chaldeans; and they will burn it with fire, and you yourself will not escape from their hand.’” **19** Then King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “I dread the Jews who have gone over to the Chaldeans, for they may give me over into their hand and they will abuse me.” **20** But Jeremiah said, “They will not give you over. Please obey the Lord in what I am saying to you, that it may go well with you and you may live. **21** But if you keep refusing to go out, this is the word which the Lord has shown me: **22** ‘Then behold, all of the women who have been left in the palace of the king of Judah are going to be brought out to the officers of the king of Babylon; and those women will say,

“Your close friends
Have misled and overpowered you;
While your feet were sunk in the mire,
They turned back.”

23 They will also bring out all your wives and your sons to the Chaldeans, and you yourself will not escape from their hand, but will be seized by the hand of the king of Babylon, and this city will be burned with fire.”

24 Then Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “Let no man know about these words and you will not die. **25** But if the officials hear that I have talked with you and come to you and say to you, ‘Tell us now what you said to the king and what the king said to you; do not hide *it* from us and we will not put you to death,’ **26** then you are to say to them, ‘I was presenting my petition before the king, not to make me return to the house of Jonathan to die there.’” **27** Then all the officials came to Jeremiah and questioned him. So he reported to them in accordance with all

these words which the king had commanded; and they ceased speaking with him, since the conversation had not been overheard. **28** So Jeremiah stayed in the court of the guardhouse until the day that Jerusalem was captured.

Jeremiah 39...

Now when Jerusalem was captured in the ninth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army came to Jerusalem and laid siege to it; **2** in the eleventh year of Zedekiah, in the fourth month, in the ninth *day* of the month, the city *wall* was breached. **3** Then all the officials of the king of Babylon came in and sat down at the Middle Gate: Nergal-sarezer, Samgarnebu, Sarsekim the Rabsaris, Nergal-sarezer *the* Rabmag, and all the rest of the officials of the king of Babylon. **4** When Zedekiah the king of Judah and all the men of war saw them, they fled and went out of the city at night by way of the king's garden through the gate between the two walls; and he went out toward the Arabah. **5** But the army of the Chaldeans pursued them and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho; and they seized him and brought him up to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon at Riblah in the land of Hamath, and he passed sentence on him. **6** Then the king of Babylon slew the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes at Riblah; the king of Babylon also slew all the nobles of Judah. **7** He then blinded Zedekiah's eyes and bound him in fetters of bronze to bring him to Babylon. **8** The Chaldeans also burned with fire the king's palace and the houses of the people, and they broke down the walls of Jerusalem.

Matthew 17...

24 When they came to Capernaum, those who collected the two-drachma *tax* came to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the two-drachma *tax*?" **25** He *said, "Yes." And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll-tax, from their sons or from strangers?" **26** When Peter said, "From strangers," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are exempt. **27** However, so that we do not offend them, ***go to the sea and throw in a hook, and take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for you and Me.***"

Matthew 22...

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted together how they might trap Him in what He said. **16** And they *sent their disciples to Him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any. **17** Tell us then, what do

You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?" **18** But Jesus perceived their malice, and said, "Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites? **19** Show Me the coin *used* for the poll-tax." And they brought Him a denarius. **20** And He *said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" **21** They *said to Him, "Caesar's." Then **He *said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's."** **22** And hearing *this*, they were amazed, and leaving Him, they went away.

Acts 20...

25 "And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face. **26** Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. **27** For ***I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.*** **28** ***Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.*** **29** I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; **30** and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. **31** Therefore ***be on the alert***, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. **32** And now ***I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.*** **33** ***I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes.*** **34** You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my *own* needs and to the men who were with me. **35** In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner ***you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'***"

Appendix 1...The "analogy of faith"

The "analogy of faith" is a reformed hermeneutical principle which states that, ***since all scriptures are harmoniously united with no essential contradictions, therefore, every proposed interpretation of any passage must be compared with what the other parts of the bible teach.*** In other words, the "faith," or body of doctrine, which the scriptures as a whole proclaim will not be contradicted in any way by any passage. ***Therefore, if two or three different interpretations of a verse are equally possible, any interpretation that contradicts the clear teaching of any other scriptures must be ruled out from the beginning.***

Another related principle, that is very helpful in interpreting prophecy and apocalyptic literature in particular, is that the clear must interpret the unclear....

Source...monergism.com

Example of the Analogy of Faith... “Does James 2 contradict Romans 4?”

The most serious problem these verses pose is the question of what James 2:24 means: "You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone." Some imagine that this contradicts Paul in Romans 3:28: "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law." John Calvin explained this apparent difficulty:

It appears certain that [James] is speaking of the manifestation, not of the imputation of righteousness, as if he had said, Those who are justified by faith prove their justification by obedience and good works, not by a bare and imaginary semblance of faith. In one word, he is not discussing the mode of justification, but requiring that the justification of all believers shall be operative. And as Paul contends that men are justified without the aid of works, so James will not allow any to be regarded as Justified who are destitute of good works ... Let them twist the words of James as they may, they will never extract out of them more than two propositions: That an empty phantom of faith does not justify, and that the believer, not contented with such an imagination, manifests his justification by good works. [Henry Beveridge, trans., John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3:17:12 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966 reprint), 2: 115.]

James is not at odds with Paul. "They are not antagonists facing each other with crossed swords; they stand back to back, confronting different foes of the gospel." [Alexander Ross, "The Epistle of James and John," *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 53.] In 1:17-18, James affirmed that salvation is a gift bestowed according to the sovereign will of God. Now he is stressing the importance of faith's fruit—the righteous behavior that genuine faith always produces. Paul, too, saw righteous works as the necessary proof of faith.

Those who imagine a discrepancy between James and Paul rarely observe that it was Paul who wrote, "Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!" (Rom. 6:15); and "Having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness" (v. 18). Thus Paul condemns the same error James is exposing here. Paul never advocated any concept of dormant faith.

When Paul writes, "by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight," (Rom. 3:20), he is combatting a Jewish legalism which insisted upon the need for works to be justified; James insists upon the need for works in the lives of those who have been justified by faith. Paul insists that no man can ever win justification through his own efforts ... James demands that a man who already claims to stand in right relationship with God through faith must by a life of good works demonstrate that he has become a new creature in Christ. With this Paul thoroughly agreed. Paul was rooting out 'works' that excluded and destroyed saving faith; James was stimulating a sluggish faith that minimized the results of saving faith in daily life. [D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistle of James* (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 175.]

James and Paul both echo Jesus' preaching. Paul's emphasis is an echo of Matthew 5:3: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." James's teaching has the ring of Matthew 7:21: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven." Paul represents the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount; James the end of it. Paul declares that we are saved by faith *without the deeds of the law*. James declares that we are saved by faith, *which shows itself in works*. Both James and Paul view good works as the proof of faith—not the path to salvation.

James could not be more explicit. He is confronting the concept of a passive, false "faith," which is devoid of the fruits of salvation. He is not arguing for works in addition to or apart from faith. He is showing why and how, true, living faith always works. He is fighting against dead orthodoxy and its tendency to abuse grace. The error James assails is faith without works; justification without sanctification; salvation without new life.

Again, James echoes the Master Himself, who insisted on a theology of lordship that involved obedience, not lip-service. Jesus chided the disobedient ones who had attached themselves to Him in name only: "Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46). Verbal allegiance, He said, will get no one to heaven: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21). That is in perfect harmony with James: "Prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves" (1:22); for "faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself" (2:17).

Source...Grace to You (GTY.org)

Excerpts from the Westminster Confession of Faith...Chapter 1 “Of the Holy Scripture”

VI. *The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word:...*

VII. *All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.*

IX. *The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.*

In Conclusion...

“Head knowledge is not evil in and of itself. Most of our Reformed and Puritan forefathers were highly educated. The Reformers never tired of stressing the value of Christian education. But this education must be empowered by the Holy Spirit and applied to the heart. Head knowledge is insufficient without the Spirit’s application to the inward man.”

Joel Beeke

Westminster Larger Catechism, Q&A 157:

The holy Scriptures are to be read with an high and reverent esteem of them; with a firm persuasion that they are the very Word of God, and that He only can enable us to understand them; with desire to know, believe, and obey the will of God revealed in them; with diligence, and attention to the matter and scope of them; with meditation, application, self-denial, and prayer.