

LESSON 3

HOW TO APPLY A PASSAGE TO OUR DAY-TO-DAY LIVES

To begin: When trying to apply a Scripture, we should ask, "Does this passage teach us about our conduct in society, the home, or at work? Does it concern our moral and ethical behavior?"

Christians read the Bible not only to discover what to believe, but also to learn how to live. The Bible contains a standard intended to guide Christians' everyday lives and moral and ethical behavior. How can we know what that standard is? How are we to apply biblical teachings given two thousand years ago to the moral issues we face in the world today?

THE BIBLE AND CHRISTIAN LIVING

Christians are to live as the Bible directs. What part of the Bible? All of it! Of course, not all of the Bible is intended to guide Christians in the same way. The Old Testament does not apply directly to us, but it can still help us as we strive to lead the Christian life:

(1) Old Testament laws illustrate how God views some moral and ethical issues.

(2) Old Testament history illustrates how God deals with man; specifically, by rewarding obedience and punishing disobedience.

(3) Old Testament characters sometimes demonstrate how faith in God works, or should work, in the lives of His people.

(4) Old Testament wisdom literature is universally applicable, in that it provides a guide to help people live wisely in the presence of an all-knowing, altogether holy God.

(5) Old Testament prophets spoke to God's

people then, bringing lessons that are often applicable to His people today.

When we turn to the New Testament, we are reading books that were written to and for Christians today, just as they were written for Christians in the first century. Therefore, we should usually assume that what we find written in the New Testament is directly applicable to us. How?

(1) The Gospels are applicable because they provide us with the story of Jesus. Since we are to "follow in His steps" (1 Peter 2:21), we need to view Jesus' actions as examples for us to follow.

(2) The Gospels are also applicable because they contain the teachings of Jesus. As His disciples, we are to obey His teachings.

(3) The Book of Acts is applicable because it tells how the church began and grew. Also, it provides a picture of a dynamic movement, furthered by dedicated disciples—a picture which should inspire us to greater service.

(4) The Epistles are applicable because they were written to Christians. Though they deal with the problems of specific congregations and individuals, the instructions they provide are often directly applicable to our situations.

(5) Revelation is applicable because it was written to encourage persecuted Christians to remain faithful by providing them with a message of eventual victory. Therefore, it encourages us to focus on the ultimate and inevitable victory of God and His people.

As we read the New Testament, then, we begin with the assumption that what we are reading applies to us. When we read that the

Christians at Rome were told, “. . . present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice” (Romans 12:1), we assume that we are to do the same. Since James told his readers that “pure and undefiled religion” is to “visit orphans and widows in their distress . . .” (James 1:27), we assume that we, too, are required to “visit orphans and widows” who are in times of “distress.” Because Jesus told His disciples, “Let your light shine before men” (Matthew 5:16), we assume that we are likewise to let our light shine.

Even if we assume that such verses apply directly to us, there may still be questions for us to answer.

- With regard to Romans 12:1, we must decide what it means to present our bodies as a living and holy sacrifice to God. What will we do if we are trying to obey that requirement?
- With regard to James 1:27, we ask, “What does ‘visit’ mean?” We must learn that “visit” includes more than going to see someone; it means to care for people and meet their needs. Further, we should not limit our concern to orphans and widows. They were mentioned by James because they were the people in that day who were most likely to be in need of help. We should view James 1:27 as an encouragement to care for anyone who is needy for any reason.
- With regard to Matthew 5:16, the question that arises is “How do we let our light shine?” Jesus Himself answered that question in the verse: We let our light shine by doing good works. To apply the passage individually, we must ask “What good works can *I* do to let *my* light shine?”

Having to answer such questions does not negate the truth that most of the instructions in the New Testament apply directly to us just as they applied to the first readers. The first readers would themselves have had to ask and seek answers to such questions!

If the text itself suggests a reason why the passage may not be directly applicable to us, then we should seek another way to apply it. Sometimes the New Testament contains instructions

that were given to individuals and were not intended to apply to everyone. Sometimes we find instructions expressed in figurative language that was not intended to be taken literally. Some instructions in the New Testament reflect ancient customs that are no longer practiced.

In such cases, Christians can apply the passages by asking, “Is there some Christian principle that lies behind these instructions which is universally applicable?” In many countries today, for instance, it is not customary for people to greet one another with a kiss. How, then, do we apply the passages which say, “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (such as Romans 16:16a)? We can apply that principle by greeting one another warmly with whatever kind of greeting is customary in our culture.

However, we cannot assume that cultural changes which occur over time should necessarily affect our interpretation of the Scriptures. Today, for example, in the US and other countries, it is becoming common for a man and a woman to live together without being married. Even if society does not condemn such a practice, the Bible does! Cultural change does not make a wrong practice right. Similarly, the recent emphasis in many countries on women’s rights causes some people to reject New Testament teachings that the husband is the head of the wife and that women are to keep silent in the church assembly. Such teachings, they think, are outdated. In contrast, the New Testament continues to teach the same thing it has taught for almost two thousand years about the role of women in the home and in the church. Changes in the way people today see the relationship between man and woman are not sufficient reason for Christians to reject what the Bible plainly teaches.

How, then, do we apply the Bible, especially the New Testament, to living the Christian life? Primarily, by assuming that most of what we read applies directly to us. When we read, “Husbands, love your wives” (Ephesians 5:25), all we need to do is to ask, “How am I to manifest such love?” When we read, “Be kind to one another” (Ephesians 4:32a), we ask, “What is kindness, and how am I to show kindness to others?” For such passages, the old saying is true: “That does not need interpretation; it just needs application!”

THE BIBLE AND MORALS

Another question that needs to be answered as we apply the Bible to our daily lives is “How can we apply the Scriptures to moral and ethical issues?” The answer to that question is not obvious or easy, as is evident from the following facts: (1) Some who profess to believe the Bible conclude that there are no moral absolutes applicable to today’s society. (2) Moral and ethical issues have arisen in the modern world which were unknown in biblical times. Paul, for example, said nothing specific about whether it was right or wrong to clone human beings. (3) Many who believe the Bible disagree on what the Bible requires with regard to moral issues—issues like what constitutes “modest apparel” (1 Timothy 2:9, KJV). (4) Some biblical requirements—such as “If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you . . .” (Matthew 5:29)—are difficult to understand and apply.

How can Christians today, in spite of these difficulties, discover answers to the moral questions that confront us? What guidelines should govern our application of biblical teachings to living pure and holy lives?

God’s Moral Standard for Us Is Found in the Bible

Since the Bible equips the man of God “for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16, 17), we who believe the Bible look to God’s Word for guidance with regard to moral and ethical questions. What part of the Bible contains moral instructions for us today?

The Old Testament and the Christian. We need to remember that the laws of the Old Testament do not apply directly today, since the old covenant has been taken away (see Ephesians 2:15). However, the moral and ethical laws of the new covenant do not differ drastically from those of the old. If the Mosaic laws specifically condemn an action as immoral, we can probably safely assume that God still considers such actions immoral.

Further, the New Testament says that we are to learn lessons from the Old Testament (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11). Of course, we must be careful about drawing moral lessons from the actions of Old Testament characters. Usually, Old Testament narratives tell what the actors in the biblical drama did without indicating whether

it was good or bad. We should hesitate before using Vashti or Esther (in the Book of Esther), for instance, as good moral examples for young women today. In general, the actions of Old Testament characters must be judged by the Law under which they lived. Actions that pass that test can then be used as good examples to illustrate virtues required by the New Testament law.

If an inspired New Testament writer used an Old Testament law or incident to prove how Christians should live, we can accept that application of the Old Testament as saying that the same standard is required today. Otherwise, nothing in the Old Testament is bound on people today.

The New Testament and the Christian. The New Testament, on the other hand, was given in its entirety to teach Christians how to please God. Consequently, every part of the New Testament contains material to teach us how to conduct ourselves in our daily lives. The Gospels contain not only the story of the life of Jesus, but also the record of His teachings. These accounts were written by church members and were given to and read in the early churches. They were undoubtedly intended to teach Christ’s disciples how to live and follow the Master.

The Book of Acts contains little in the way of moral instructions, but it paints a picture of the dedication of early Christians. Such behavior was probably intended to be normative for later generations of the Lord’s church. The Epistles were specifically written to help Christians live faithful lives before the Lord. They contain an abundance of moral and ethical teaching. Even the Book of Revelation warns against immorality (see Revelation 21:8). Consequently, if we want to know what God requires of Christians with regard to moral and ethical behavior, we can (and should) read and study the entire New Testament.

God’s Moral Standard Is Rooted in Absolutes

Moral relativists believe that nothing is absolutely and certainly wrong on all occasions. They say that whether or not something is wrong depends on the circumstances. They may agree that adultery is wrong in most cases but claim that it is justifiable and, therefore, not a sin in certain circumstances. Whether lying or murder is wrong,

they would argue, depends altogether on the circumstances in which a person lies or murders. According to them, there are no absolutes.¹

An argument used to support these views is that times and customs change; some think that God's laws must change as well. When applying God's laws, they want to take into account the new world in which we live and disregard laws which seem strange to people today.

While changing customs may indeed affect the application of God's Word, we must begin our consideration of God's moral laws with the understanding that there are some moral absolutes. If we accept the Bible as our guide, then we must accept the fact that—regardless of changes in culture, place, or time—*some things are always wrong!* It has always been wrong to murder, to lie, to steal, and to commit adultery; and it is still wrong to commit such acts.

As an example of a moral absolute, consider what the Bible teaches regarding homosexual behavior. While many in recent times have argued for the legitimacy of homosexuality as an acceptable alternative lifestyle (and have attacked those who teach against the practice as "homophobes" and "bigots"), the Bible consistently teaches that homosexuality is a sin (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:26, 27).² Christians can agree that homosexuality is not a worse sin than others—such as adultery or fornication. Also, Christians should understand that all sinners, including homosexuals, are to be loved rather than hated (even though their sins are to be condemned). Still, because we believe the Bible, we must accept the plain biblical teaching that the practice of homosexuality is sinful.

God's Moral Standard Requires An Application of Principles From His Word

Concerning some practices, we can say without hesitation, "That is wrong because the Bible plainly teaches that it is sinful." However, not every moral or ethical question can be dealt with so easily. Why?

¹The proposition "There are no absolutes" is self-contradictory, since it is itself an absolute statement.

²See also the examples of the Sodomites in Genesis 19:1–26 and that of the wicked men of Gibeah in Judges 19–21. In the New Testament, see 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10; 1 Timothy 1:10.

One challenge is that the Bible gives instructions concerning situations which no longer exist. The New Testament contains seemingly outdated laws such as those governing slaves and slave-owners. How do such laws apply in places where slavery no longer exists? Again, moral questions arise today about which the Bible does not speak directly. What about gambling? Nothing in the Bible specifically condemns gambling. Must we conclude, therefore, that gambling is acceptable to God? In addition, modern technology raises questions that are not specifically answered in the Scriptures. (1) The Bible does not specifically condemn war, but should Christians regard nuclear war or the bombing of cities as wrong? (2) Murder is wrong, but is the destruction of human embryos for the purpose of medical research wrong? (3) If human beings could be cloned, would that be wrong? (4) Do modern inventions like the automobile, the computer, and the Internet raise moral or ethical issues? If so, how can those issues be resolved?

Since the Bible does not directly address such questions, the only solution for Christians who look to God's Word for guidance is to seek *principles* in the Bible which will help to deal with such matters.

When we study the Scriptures, *we are to be concerned not only about the obvious statements, but also about the principles which lie behind those statements.* This practice will help us to apply biblical teaching to moral questions in a number of ways.

First, being concerned about biblical principles will help us to apply teachings which are otherwise problematic. Even though Jesus said to tear out the eye or cut off the hand that causes stumbling (Matthew 5:29, 30; Mark 9:43–48; KJV), virtually everyone understands that He did not intend for these words to be taken literally. Rather, using hyperbolic language, He was teaching a principle: If anything causes us to sin—no matter how dear it is to us—we need to get rid of it! That principle can be applied not only to the problem of lust, but also to any situation in which a Christian might be tempted to sin. Similarly, when Jesus said, "Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two" (Matthew 5:41), He established a principle for Christians: When we are obligated to do something, we must do it; and we should be willing to do even more than is required. Likewise,

Jesus' words "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21) established a principle followed by early Christians: We are to give governing authorities honor and pay our taxes.³

Second, an understanding of biblical principles will help us to deal with moral questions which are not specifically discussed in the Bible. Gambling may not be specifically condemned in the Bible, but we can point out that gambling violates certain biblical principles. (1) Gambling violates the principle that a person should work to earn a living, since the gambler hopes to make money without working. (2) Gambling violates the principle of stewardship, since the gambler risks something of value and will likely get nothing in return for it. (3) Gambling violates the principle that a man should love his neighbor as himself, since the gambler hopes to profit at the expense of others who lose money when he wins it.

Third, considering principles found in the Bible will help us to answer moral questions related to modern technology. Does the Bible have anything to say about how a Christian should drive an automobile? Various biblical principles apply to driving: (1) As Christians, we must obey the laws of the land. (2) We must demonstrate love for others; therefore, we are not to drive in an inconsiderate, rude, selfish manner. (3) We must value human life; therefore, we cannot drive in a reckless way that endangers ourselves or others. In a similar way, we can deal with questions related to abortion, euthanasia, the use of embryonic stem cells for research, and cloning, based on the principle of the unique value of human life.

Fourth, a concern for biblical principles will help us to make moral decisions when customs change. Biblical principles remain the same from place to place and from age to age, but customs and cultures change. The application of certain principles may have to be adapted to changing circumstances. Women of the first century were told to dress in "modest apparel" (1 Timothy 2:9; KJV), but the definition of "modest" varies from place to place and from time to time. Similarly, Chris-

³Probably, more is involved in this saying. It likely suggests what Americans would call "the separation of church and state," and it certainly teaches the principle that Christ's kingdom is not an earthly kingdom in competition with "Caesar's kingdom."

tians are to avoid worldliness (Romans 12:1, 2; James 1:27b), but what is considered to be worldly is not the same in every culture. In the early twentieth-century US, playing cards and going to the movies were considered worldly; today, few people see those activities, in and of themselves, as worldly.⁴ While Christians are to be a good influence in their culture, to let our "light" shine before men (Matthew 5:14–16), what may damage our influence will vary depending on our situations.

When faced with changing cultures, Christians do not have to hold adamantly to "rules" which are not spelled out in the Bible. Neither can we throw off all restraint, saying, in effect, "Since my usual rules are no longer applicable or enforceable, I don't have to live by any rules!" Rather, we can and should ask, "What biblical principles are applicable to this situation in this culture at this time, and what do they require of me?" Then we can determine to live by those principles. Cultures change, but biblical principles never change. Conscientious Christians will always be concerned about applying those principles to the current circumstances. In other words, we do not ask, "What was regarded as worldly by people fifty years ago?" Rather, we say, "What is to be regarded as worldly today? Whatever it is, I must avoid it."

Fifth, even when the relationships described in the Bible are analogous to those found in today's world, the principles which lie behind the instructions given in the Bible should be noted. For example, the master/slave relationship no longer exists in most parts of the world. Instead, most people find themselves in an employer/employee relationship, which is in many ways analogous to the master/slave relationship in Bible times. Consequently, the instructions to masters and slaves can be applied to employers and employees today. However, the principles that lie behind those instructions—principles that relate to respect for others, fulfilling our obligations (and going beyond the minimum requirements), and doing what is best for others—apply even when the specific instructions given in the Bible do not seem applicable.

⁴Today most Christians think that what is done with the cards—whether or not gambling is involved—and what kind of movies we view determines whether or not these activities are worldly.

The importance of basing moral decisions and behavior on biblical principles can hardly be overemphasized. We need to recognize that the Bible's guidance in moral and ethical matters is provided more often by the communication of principles than by the statement of rules!

God's Moral Standard Was Intended To Be Applied by Individual Christians

The moral requirements of the New Testament are addressed to individuals. James, for instance, said that "pure . . . religion" is, in part, to "keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27). Consequently, each individual Christian has the responsibility to live by those requirements.

Of course, the New Testament also teaches Christians to encourage and exhort one another to live faithfully, and it gives instructions as to how to deal with disciples who sin openly (see James 5:19, 20; Galatians 6:1, 2; Matthew 18:15–17; 1 Corinthians 5). Still, we are responsible for ourselves and will ultimately answer to God for our own behavior.

The significance of these facts is that, being individual children of God, we have both the obligation and the freedom to determine for ourselves our moral responsibility in our own situations. The church must deal with open and obvious sin within its membership. Preachers and teachers must apply God's Word to the moral issues facing specific congregations. The New Testament does not give any man or group of men, or the church as a whole, the right to make rules regarding moral behavior which go beyond what the Bible teaches.

For individual Christians, what does that fact mean? It means that God has put us on our honor to do our best to live up to the standards of the high calling to which we have been called (Ephesians 4:1). God has given us the rules we are to live by, and no one can make any rules which bind us beyond those found in the Bible. We must, however, in order to please God, search the Scriptures diligently to discover how God wants us to live; and then we must do our best to live according to the principles we discover.⁵

⁵Christians should not make rules for one another; but a Christian can, if he chooses, make rules for himself. He might say, "I will never go into a saloon" or "I will never gamble." Also, parents can (and should) make rules for their children.

God's Moral Standard Was Intended To Be Challenging

If we as Christians were given complete freedom to decide what God requires of us in our daily lives, we might be inclined to underestimate the demands of the gospel. That is, if we could exercise our own preferences in applying Bible truths to our lives, we might make life easy for ourselves.

One way people justify the misapplication of the Scriptures is by diluting biblical teachings, making statements like the following:

- "Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell all that he had and give to the poor, and then to follow Him [Matthew 19:16–22], *but His instructions do not really apply to us. We do not have to give up everything to follow Jesus.*"
- "Jesus said that unless we hate our closest kin [Luke 14:25–27], we cannot be His disciples, *but He obviously did not mean that our love for Him must be that strong.*"
- "Jesus said that we must love God with all our heart and soul and mind [Matthew 22:37], *but it is enough to love God with some of what we are and what we have.*"
- "The early disciples sold their possessions and shared with other Christians [Acts 2:44, 45], *but that is an example we do not have to follow. Instead, we are to give a token amount on the Lord's Day.*"
- "The early disciples went everywhere preaching the gospel [Acts 8:4], *but it is obvious that we do not have to do the same.*"
- "Paul said that he no longer lived, but Christ lived in him [Galatians 2:20], *but we do not have to have the same radical attitude to please God.*"

There is some truth in some of these conclusions. Certainly, God does not require all of us to sell everything we have and give it to the poor in order to follow Christ. Proper interpretation and application of Acts 2 would, in fact, lead to the conclusion that Christians in ordinary circumstances do not need to sell what they possess to share with others.

The lesson here is that we must not explain away such passages so that they become meaningless. We may conclude that, since God does not

require us to give away everything, He does not require us to give up anything to be Christians. That would be a false conclusion.

Perhaps the solution to the temptation to dilute the requirements of Christ is to realize that such passages as those cited above establish the principle that *Christians are to be radically committed to Christ*. How that commitment is expressed may vary according to circumstances, but it must always be present. Sometimes, when other Christians are in need, the circumstances may really call for us to sell our goods and share with others. In some cases it may require us to give up all that we have to follow Christ. It may require us to be honest when no one else is honest; it may even require us to die for the faith. Whatever total commitment requires, to please God we must meet the challenge of having that kind of commitment. When applying biblical principles to our daily lives, we must be careful not to dilute the radical requirements of the gospel.

CONCLUSION

As Christians, we look to the Bible to learn how God would have us live. As we try to apply God's Word to daily living as well as the moral and ethical issues we face, we may discover that difficult questions arise. We can answer those questions by doing the following: (1) recognize that the Bible contains God's moral standard; (2) acknowledge that God's requirements are rooted in absolutes; (3) seek to understand and apply the moral and ethical principles which are taught in God's Word, looking for principles rather than rules; (4) accept responsibility to determine for ourselves what we should do when faced with moral and ethical questions; and (5) refuse to explain away the challenging demands of the gospel.

By using these guidelines, we should be able to live in such a way that the Lord will ultimately say, "Well done, good and faithful slave" (Matthew 25:23a).
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