



connect
church

How to read the Bible for all it's worth

Week 4 – How to apply the bible correctly.

The seed that fell on good soil represents those who truly hear and understand God's word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!

Matthew 13:23



Many Christians if they were honest haven't put what they've learned and what they have memorized into practice. Their Bible knowledge has made very little difference in their lives.

The missing ingredient in many Bible studies, sermons and Christian lives is APPLICATION.

So what? Is application that important? And what does application really mean?

Very simply stated, application is answering the question "So what?" Another way of stating would be; Why should I know these facts? How can I Use this information? What am I going to do about what I have just learned? What should I do about it?

You might know a lot of information about cars, cricket or even crochet, but SO WHAT? You might even know John 3:16 off by heart, but SO WHAT?

Application forces the truth of God's word to specific, life-related situations. It helps people understand what to do or how to use what they have learned.

APPLICATION PERSUADES PEOPLE TO ACT.

What application isn't.

1. Information

This is simply getting the facts. Gathering facts is important, but it is not enough. It helps us put things into context, but it is only the 1st step of application

2. Concepts

We need to know what the Bible means, not just what it says. Understanding follows reading, but is different to application. Many people understand Biblical truths without ever changing their lives. Read [James 2:19](#) to see what he said about believing God's word.

3. Relevance

This explains how what happened in Bible times can happen today. When reading the Bible we see that what happened many centuries ago is similar to what is happening today. But the Bible being relevant doesn't mean that we are going to do anything about applying Biblical principles to our own lives.

If that isn't what application is, then what steps will lead a person to applying the bible?

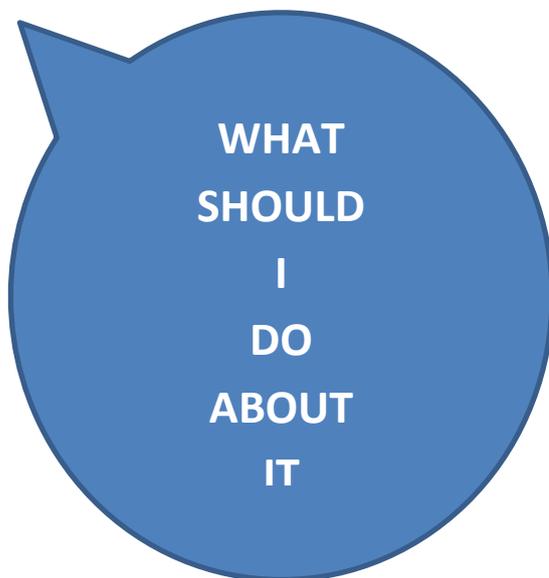
Discuss what you think a person needs to do in order to apply God's Word to their life.

In general, the steps to personal application include:

1. The person (reader or listener) must receive the message. It sounds easy, but if the receiver is not open to hearing God's Word then the process stops before it has started. Others have blocked communication with God *through disobedience or secret sin*. Reception can also be hindered through poor communication by writers, preachers and teachers who twist the message, get lost in the details, or make it boring.

The 1st step to personal application of the Bible means *being open to God's Word as He speaks through His Word*. It means approaching Scripture with the prayer, 'Lord, speak to me' and eagerly anticipating God's direction, counsel and personal communication.

2. The person should reflect on his or her life. This is simply putting Bible truths and principles into a personal context, asking 'What does the message mean for me?' It means taking an honest look, at our lives anticipating there will be a lesson to learn and apply. Just take it personally, looking for application areas.
3. The person should identify what he or she needs to change. This is really an extension of the previous step. After asking 'What area of my life does this speak to?' we should ask, 'What should I do about it?' This means being action oriented – ready and willing to obey the Holy Spirit's conviction.



4. The person should lay out a plan to make that change. This involves asking yourself the question 'What should I do right away?' Now that I know what God wants me to do, what am I going to do about it? When will I start? What will be my first step?

Looking at the steps above, you would think that applying the Bible looks pretty simple. So why is application so difficult?

Question: In one sentence how would you explain what it means to apply the Bible?

In summary, application asks, "So what?"

- Why should I know these facts?
- How can I use this information?
- What am I going to do about what I have just learned?

Application isn't:

- Information
- Concepts
- Relevance

Steps to personal application:

1. Receive the message
2. Reflect on your life
3. Identify what you need to change
4. Lay out a plan to make that change



Why is application so hard?

Many Christians want to apply the Bible, but despite their desires, it doesn't seem to be happening. The spirit is willing, but the application is weak! The bottom line is that we just don't know what to do.

Reasons for weak applications

1. It's **HARD WORK**. Applying the Bible to our lives takes time and it can also be quite threatening to look honestly at our lives in light of Scripture because it may require a change that we don't want to make.
2. **WRONG ASSUMPTIONS**. Many Christians treat the Bible as though it were a magic book. They think that if they simply read a passage, the meaning and application will jump out at them. God can and does speak to us directly, but he has also given us a mind to use. That's why He wants us to **STUDY** the Bible.

What does 2 Timothy 2:15 say?

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3. *FEAR*. We can fear that our application is TOO SIMPLISTIC. Some Christians are looking for deep complicated message from a passage. Sometimes there are NO 'deep truths' or hidden meanings in the passage. But timeless truths and personal applications are often quite simple.

Misconceptions about application

Some people oppose all this talk about application, but their opposition is mainly based on misconceptions. Their voices of opposition may be characterised by the following statements.

1. *"The Christian life cannot be reduced to a set of formulas'.*

This statement assumes that application means giving people an easy to use, easy to follow set of instructions to solve a problem, resolve a conflict and so forth. But application is not a simplistic '1...2...3...' approach to life.

2. *"Becoming a Christian and then living the Christian life is not a matter of works but of faith."*

That statement is true, but application does not mean working one's way to heaven or depending on self instead of God. It does, however, involve personal response to God's Word, everything from "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ," to "go into all the world and preach the gospel." In fact, as James reminds us, "Faith that doesn't show itself by good works is no faith at is dead and useless" (James 2:17).

3. *"God is more interested in our being the right kind of people than in our doing things for him."*

Again, this betrays a misconception of the word application, as though it refers to a narrow category of responses. But a personal application might be to draw closer to Christ through worship, prayer, meditation, or study. An application for someone else might involve yielding certain areas of life to Christ's control. Application means obedience and the Bible is filled with that admonition.

4. *"What people really need is sound theology. This emphasis on action is shallow"*
Theologian R. C. Sproul says that Western Christians are "biblically illiterate" and that there is no substitute for solid, biblical theology. I would agree, and certainly actions that are not grounded in the Word of God will be shallow at best. But right thinking should lead to right living. Unfortunately, however, the shift for thinking to acting is not automatic. Many people

know a lot about the Bible and may even get A's in theology classes, but they don't allow God's truth to penetrate their hearts. Their head knowledge hasn't filtered down into the rest of their lives.

5. *“Only the Holy Spirit can apply the words of Scripture to a person’s life”*

Whether written or spoken, Bible applications can never take the place of the Holy Spirit. But there is a place for suggested courses for action, illustrations of how others have put faith into practice, insights into Scripture’s timeless truths and personal challenges.

Are you ready for application? When you take out your Bible ask yourself;

If I open it and understand it, will I do it?

Do I really want to do what God wants?

If you are closed to God, reading His Word will be a waste of time!

BUT by expressing your need to God, you will prepare your heart to receive his truth. Verses will seem to jump off the page, and you'll find more applications. Being alert and focusing your attention will help you respond to the directions God gives in the Bible. If you are open to God's Word, use a translation that you can easily understand, use the right tools, and express your needs to God, you will be ready to apply the Bible. Of course, getting ready is just the first step in reading, understanding, and obeying God's Word. Next we will see **how to get the Bible off the shelf and into the self!**

In summary,

People make weak application because:

- Applying the Bible is hard work
- They are afraid
- They don't prepare
- They don't know how

To overcome application resistance:

- Be open to the Word of God
- Use a translation of Scripture that you can easily understand
- Use Bible study tools
- Express your needs to God

Ask yourself;

What is the most difficult aspect of bible application for you?

What would help you to be more open to God’s Word?

Climbing up the Pyramid

As we have discussed, application is the step between *knowing* what the Bible says and *doing* what it says.

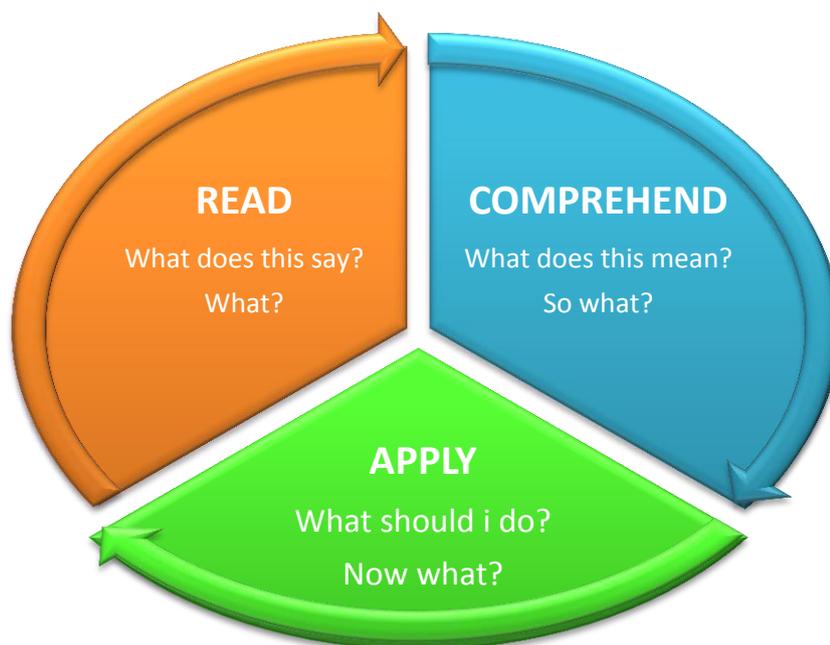
All Bible study methods have the same three basic stages; Read, Comprehend and Apply.

At the read stage we answer the question 'What does it say?'

At comprehend we answer 'What does this mean?'

And at apply we answer 'What should I do?'

If any of these stages is missing, we will not fully understand and obey what the Bible teaches



At the Read stage, we read a specific passage and *try to understand the story, what is happening*. If this stage is underemphasized, we will not get much out of the study. Our Bible reading will feel dry.

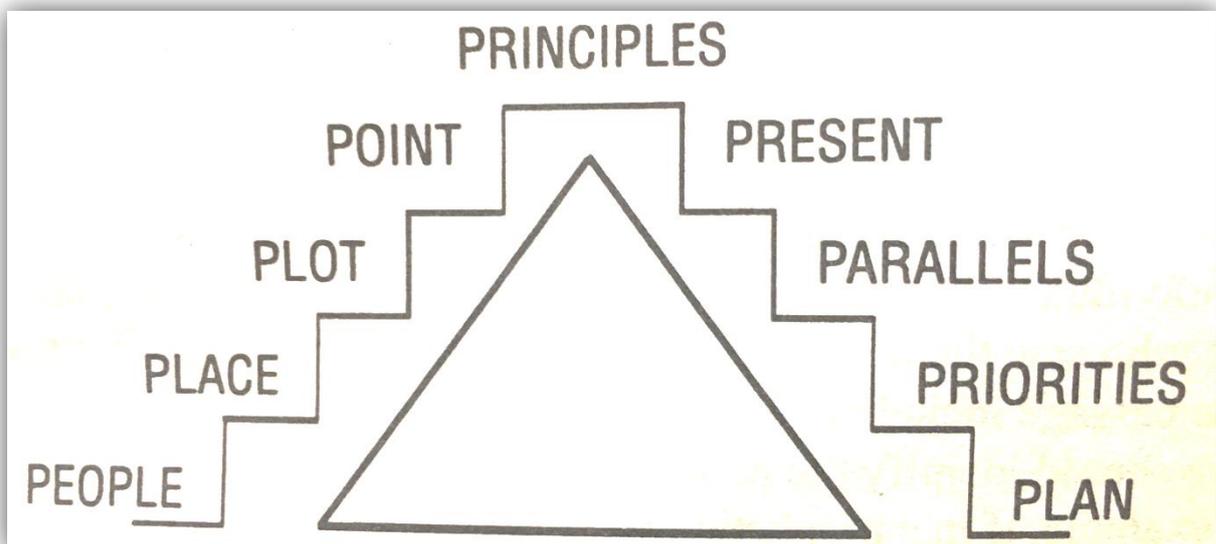
At the Comprehend stage, *we look for the biblical principles* that transcend time and are transferable. People who neglect this stage run the risk of misinterpreting, and therefore misapplying, a passage.

At the Apply stage, *we personalize the truths* and think about how to live them out. Neglecting this stage leads to plastic beliefs, with insights from Bible study making little or no difference in our lives.

You can see that when we study a passage in Scripture, we begin in a historical, real-life situation, where God was working with and speaking to specific human beings. Then, as we let the text inform us (inductive study), we move up and away from a specific moment in history to discover the principle, the timeless truth. And then we allow that principle to

inform us as we move down and back to real life, our daily experience, making timely applications for specific, personal situations. With a simple, straightforward passage, this may be all the structure we need. But what if we can't see the biblical principles? What if we can't bring them down into our real-life situations? Of course speaking or writing about the process of studying the Bible is easy; actually doing it takes a lot more work. In fact, sometimes in-depth, application-oriented Bible study can seem impossible. That's because usually we try to climb the Pyramid in just two giant steps. Moving from Read to Comprehend takes a big jump, as does going from Comprehend to Apply. It's no wonder that many Christians get tired and stop trying. When a task seems too big or unmanageable, *it is helpful to break the task down into smaller steps*. When each step is manageable, we can make better progress and feel a sense of real **accomplishment**.

Check out the pyramid below, which includes additional, more manageable steps.



1. PEOPLE

One reason that People is the first step is because it is usually quite easy to identify the people in the passage simply by reading the text, especially in historical narratives such as Genesis or Matthew. An old Chinese proverb says, "Every journey begins with the first step." Once we take that step, we're on our way. 'People' is also an important step because we, the readers, are people too. And as we read, we discover that because human nature hasn't changed over the centuries, neither have human struggles and problems. The people include all the characters in the passage, those actively taking part and those mentioned. Sometimes no specific individuals or groups will be named in a chapter or section of a book, such as in Proverbs or Romans. But we shouldn't forget the author and the original audience. They are people too—although we may not read about these individuals, we know they are there, watching and listening in. Also, God should be included in the People category.

Acts 3:1-11 tells about Peter's healing the lame beggar by the temple gate. The people mentioned in the narrative, actively involved in the incident, are *Peter, John, the man lame from birth, the individuals who carried the lame man to the temple gate, and those who saw the man healed. Jesus is also mentioned.* Other people in the passage include God and Luke (the writer of Acts). We should identify the people and learn something about them. For example, if in a prophetic book the prophet spends a full chapter condemning a nation we've never heard of, we should use a Bible dictionary or a study Bible to find out more about what those people were like. In addition to identifying the people in the passage, it is important to identify with the people. This will help us with both interpretation and application. **In fact, at every step in our climb up the Pyramid we should ask "identification" questions.**

Here are questions to ask when identifying the *PEOPLE* in a passage and identifying with them:

- Who are all of the people in this passage?
- How are these people like people in my world?
- What characteristics in myself do I see represented in these people?

2. PLACE

This step helps put the passage in its original setting, the historical and cultural context. By taking this step, we will be *able to see, hear, and feel what we read in the text.* We can learn about Place in a study Bible or commentary, or by looking up the book in a Bible dictionary. Knowing about the city of Corinth will illuminate a passage in 1 Corinthians. Learning about Israel, Judah, and the political, economic, and religious status of Hosea's audience will help us understand his book. *The more we know about the culture, history, and problems of the people in the passage, the more we will be able to find parallels to our lives today.*

For the *PLACE* step, we can ask:

- What is the setting of the passage?
- What are the significant details in the history, culture and geography?
- What are the similarities to my world?

3. PLOT

The third step of our climb up the Bible study Pyramid is to consider the plot of the passage. Plot answers "**What's happening?**" In other words, we should be looking for what is going on among people or between God and people. Usually we can discover this by the context of the passage and book. A study Bible or commentary will also help us understand the plot. The plot is easy to unravel in a Gospel or any historical book. But a story line may not be apparent in some books of the Bible, as in 2 John or Philemon. But understanding the

conflict that underlies a passage will help unlock additional applications. Every book of the Bible either contains a conflict or speaks directly to one.

The questions to ask for *PLOT* are:

- What is happening in this passage?
- What is the conflict or tension?
- What would I have done in this situation?
- How is this similar to what is happening in my life or in the world today?

In essence during the 1st 3 steps, we go back in time to understand the passage and to involve ourselves in it.

Now as we approach the top of the pyramid, we stand above time, looking for the timeless truths. It is not SUBJECTIVE, but OBJECTIVE TRUTH.

So we must determine what a passage means, not what we wish it to be mean.

The next 3 steps will help us get over the top of the pyramid.

They are POINT (understanding the original message), PRINCIPLES (determining the timeless truths) and PRESENT (describing contemporary significance)

4. POINT

Before we can determine what something in the Bible means for us today, we must first ascertain the meaning for the original audience. The events recorded in the Bible happened to real people at specific times in history. Real audiences heard the parables, and real churches received the epistles. Therefore, we should carefully consider the cultural context (what we learned at the People, Place, and Plot steps) to find the particular lessons that God wanted to teach those people. In effect, the Point was the application for the original audience. To determine the *POINT*, we can ask:

- What was the intended message for the original audience?
- What did the people in the passage learn?
- What did God want them to do?
- What was God's solution to the problem?

Did Jesus really say?

Sometimes Jesus' words can be misinterpreted. For example in Matthew 5:29-30, Jesus says, "So if your eye, even your good eye causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body

to be thrown into hell. And if your hand, even your stronger hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell”

What was Jesus’ point? Was it a literal point?

Jesus used extreme examples (hyperbole or overstatement) to teach that avoiding sin may demand painful sacrifices.

A clear understanding of the POINT can prevent damaging misapplications and is invaluable for determining the timeless truths in the passage.

5. PRINCIPLES

After finding the *POINT*, the meaning for the original audience, our next step is to determine what transferable principles are embedded in the passage. This step is stated in plural form because often more than one principle can be found. The distinction between Point and Principle can be easy to miss because they are closely related. The principles usually connect with the original point of the passage and may even be identical to the point for the original audience. For example, in the teaching about cutting off a hand (Matthew 5:29-30), the principle is the same as the point: avoiding sin may involve painful sacrifices. The point of John 3:11-24 to the original audience and the principle for us are the same: love one another.

At times, of course, the principle and the point differ. Principles are universal and timeless. There are also times when a biblical principle will relate indirectly to the passage. For example, we can glean principles about evangelism by observing how Jesus and the disciples spread the gospel, even though "how to evangelize" is not being taught directly in the passage. Consider the lessons learned from the lives of Jeremiah, Hosea, Ezekiel, and other prophets who obeyed God despite tremendous inconvenience, persecution, suffering, and cost. And think of what we can learn about God's character by seeing his reactions to idolatry, greed, injustice, and other sins and his unflinching love for his people.

To surface the *PRINCIPLES*, we can ask:

- What is the message for all of humankind?
- What are the timeless truths?
- What is the moral of the story?



Like standing at the top of a great Egyptian pyramid, we can see for miles around and the insights are exhilarating. It would be tempting to end of journey at the top. But to apply the Bible, we must go **DOWN** the other side, back into real life.

While each passage will have one primary meaning, each passage will have a wide range of applications. The path to the top of the Pyramid narrows to a single point and a few principles, but the paths on the way down are diverse and varied.

WORKING IT THROUGH

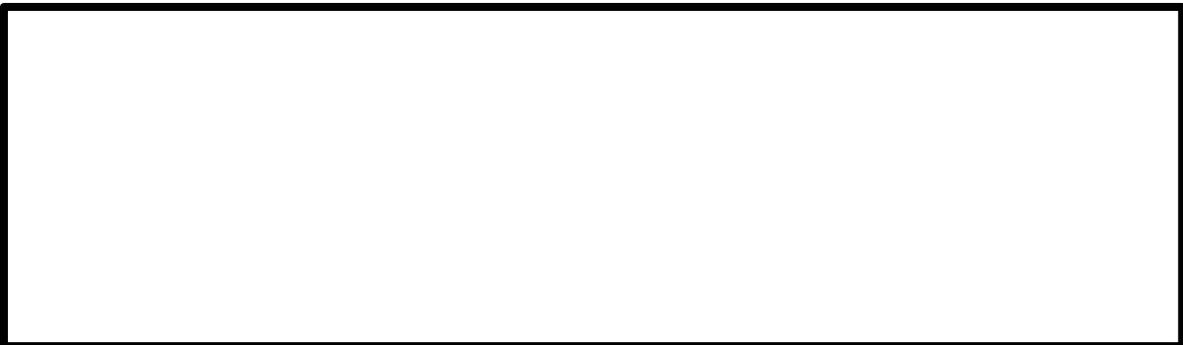
Turn to Exodus 3:1-22 and climb **UP** the pyramid. Limit your responses to 1 or 2 sentences.

PEOPLE

PLACE

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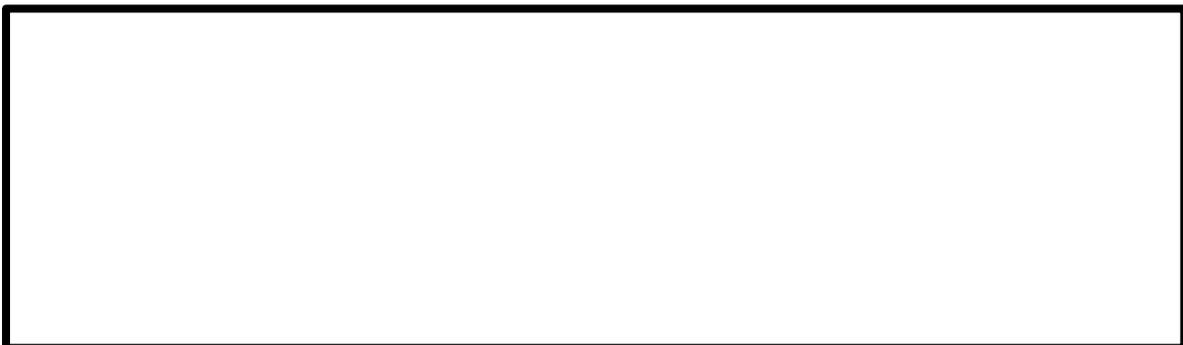
PLOT

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POINT

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PRINCIPLES

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