

for All Its Worth

The Epistles: How do I Apply Them?

A Brief Review

We continue our study of the proper interpretation of epistles by building upon the foundation of careful exegesis and bringing the truth to a point of application in today's world. Let's begin by defining these important words again and reviewing the diagram below.

Epistle – a type of letter intended to be read and understood by the public

Exegesis – to carefully study the Bible to determine its intended meaning to the original audience

Hermeneutics – taking the intended message for the original audience and translating it to today's audience (you)

The diagram below illustrates exegesis and hermeneutics:



This lesson is crucial. Let me emphasize the following point:

Nothing is more powerful than the Word of God accurately applied to a situation!

Hebrews 4:12 – “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (NASB)

It would seem that knowing how to apply the message from the original audience would be easy. Don't we just do what the Bible says? Why do we need to consider whether what the Epistles say directly applies to our life or whether we need to interpret them in some way? Share your thoughts:

The Epistles were written to a first century audience. We need to know whether the commands given to them were absolute commands that apply to everyone in every age or whether they were cultural expressions of absolute commands. What rules do we apply and when do we apply them?

Seeing the Need for Hermeneutics

Sometimes discerning the application of a passage is straightforward and relatively easy. Often, it is easier to understand the text than to obey it. Let's look at two passages from Titus and compare them. As you read these texts ask whether they apply to you, how they apply to you, and why.

Titus 2:7-8 – “in all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, dignified, sound in speech which is beyond reproach, so that the opponent will be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us.” (NASB)

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Titus 3:13 – *“Diligently help Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way so that nothing is lacking for them.”* (NASB)

Answer the previous question now. Do both of these texts apply to you? If so, how and why?

They both apply to me, but in two different ways. The passage from Titus 2:7-8 can be read directly and applied. I don't need to filter it or interpret it. I should always seek to live in this way. Titus 3:13 requires interpretation because it does not directly apply to me. I do not know Zenas or Apollo and their trip ended almost two thousand years ago. I need to interpret the principle (be helpful to Christian missionaries) and apply it in my cultural setting.

This one wasn't very hard and could be resolved with common sense. However other texts present greater challenges. Consider 1 Timothy 5:23. Is Paul encouraging us all to drink a little wine? What about 1 Corinthians 11:5... is it a sin for a woman to pray or prophesy without wearing a head covering? These passages and a host of others present real challenges to proper interpretation. We will present 13 principles that will be useful as we learn how to properly apply God's Word to today.

Two Foundational Principles

We will approach this study by chipping away at the scenarios we will encounter when interpreting the meaning of epistles for today's culture. Remember, sound interpretation (hermeneutics) is built upon sound exegesis. There are two foundational principles that will help us either narrow the possible interpretations of a passage or lead us right to the answer.

1. A text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or readers

When considering epistles, it is improper to suggest that the text means something different to us than it meant in the first century. That would imply that we have a different revelation than they received. Yet, we are considering letters written during our age: the age of the New Testament. There is no spiritual insight available to us that was not available to them. Let's look at an example.

3 John 2 - *“Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul.”* (ESV)

Some people in the “prosperity gospel” movement say that this passage teaches that it is God's will for us to always be healthy and wealthy. Does this passage mean that? Why or why not?

This passage is simply a greeting and a prayer blessing to Gaius from John. He didn't intend it to be a doctrinal statement and Gaius didn't perceive it to be a doctrinal statement because it doesn't fit into the flow or structure of the letter. If it didn't mean that to Gaius, it cannot mean that to us today.

2. Whenever we share the same (or similar) life situations as the original audience, God's word to us is the same as His word to them.

Consider 2 John 1:5-6 in which John addresses Christian love. Is there anything that limits this statement to John's culture or does it apply to everyone at every time? Why or why not?

Loving others is a basic Biblical principle that is required throughout Scriptures. The way we express love may be influenced by our culture, but the command to love is relevant regardless of culture.

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The Problem of Extending Passages beyond their Original Intention

One reason there are so many different interpretations of Scripture is that some passages are extended beyond their original meaning by using them outside of their context. How do we know when an interpretation has gone too far?

- 3. When there are comparable situations and comparable particulars, God's Word to us must be limited to its original intent.**

Colossians 3:15 is a good example of this abuse. When read alone (outside of its context), some might say that this verse states that God will give us peace about a difficult situation when we make the right decision. Without debating whether God's peace is an indication of His will, determine whether it is appropriate to use Colossians 3:15 to prove this point. Why or why not?

By reading this passage in context, we can see that it is speaking about church unity and the importance of having peace in the church body. To use it as a proof text for praying until you have a special peace from God about a decision is to extend it beyond its original intention.

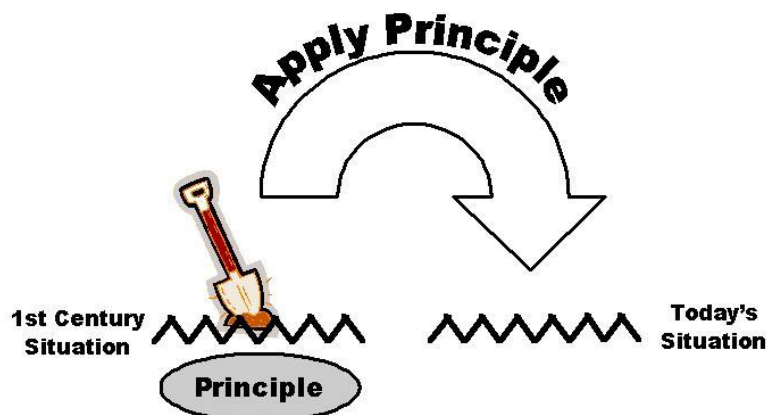
Applying a Specific Situation in Scripture to a Different Situation Today

Sometimes when we study epistles, we come across texts that address unique issues that existed at that time. Those passages can fit into two categories:

- Those that address a first century issue that would not happen today
- Those that address a first century issue that might happen today, but probably wouldn't

How do we handle these texts? Do they still hold any relevance for today? I believe they do. Let's consider this next rule and provide a couple of examples of how to apply it.

- 4. When we run into a passage that addresses an issue that wouldn't happen today or probably wouldn't happen today, use the following steps:**
 - a. Understand all the specifics about the 1st Century issue.**
 - b. Understand the underlying principle.**
 - c. Use your understanding of the specifics and the underlying principle to apply the principle to a comparable situation today.**



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Applying a Text with a First-Century Issue that Would Not Occur Today

An example of the first kind of text is Philemon 1:8-20. In this passage, Paul is writing to Philemon, a brother-in-Christ, who owned a slave named Onesimus that escaped and ran away to Rome. While in Rome, he happened to meet Paul, who was imprisoned in Rome. Onesimus heard the gospel and was saved. Paul then encouraged Onesimus to return to Philemon and bring this letter along with him.

- a) What are some of the specifics we need to understand about this situation?
- Slavery in Roman time was usually much different than the type of slavery we are familiar with. Slaves of that time period were often in that position because of their debt, not because they were taken against their own will. Slaves were generally not considered to be lesser people, although they often made up a separate social class. Many slaves were educated and served as teachers, doctors, etc...
 - By running away from Philemon, Onesimus wasn't escaping from an oppressive situation; he was running away from his responsibility. Onesimus had not been wronged; Philemon was the one who was wronged.
- b) What are some of the underlying principles in this passage?
- Getting saved doesn't relieve you of your responsibilities or the consequences that may have incurred as a result of sin.
 - We shouldn't force people into being charitable. True charity should come from the heart and be a willing gesture.
 - God's providence is so great that He turn an evil situation into something good (v. 15)
 - Being brothers and sisters in Christ is a relationship that takes precedence over any other relationship we might have between each other. Even though we might be a mother, father, son, daughter, worker, or boss in the flesh, if we are also fellow Christians, we should make sure that all we do is in love. We still have to fulfill those other relationships, but with a new attitude!
- c) Based on what you have learned from this passage, how should a church respond to the following situation:

Betty loved to spend money. She was a compulsive shopper and couldn't go into a store without buying something. She believed that getting that next thing would make her happy, but found she could never fill that hunger for more. Over the years she racked up several thousand dollars in debt. It was overwhelming. God used the consequences of her spending to reveal her sin and need of a Savior. When she turned to Christ in faith and repentance, she found forgiveness and a peace that she had never known. She knew that God forgave her of the way she had poorly managed her money. Because God had forgiven her, Betty questioned whether she should have to pay off her old debts or just start fresh. Betty approached her Pastor and asked him whether it was okay to declare bankruptcy. What does Philemon 1:8-20 teach us about how to handle this situation?

When we are saved God forgives us of all of our sins. That doesn't mean that we are delivered from the earthly consequences of those sins. If we have incurred a debt, we remain responsible to pay it. In fact, our willingness to pay our debts in a timely manner is a good witness to the world around us and demonstrates a change of heart. Onesimus demonstrated that he had truly been saved by his willingness to go back to Philemon. Proverbs 22:7 - "The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender." Betty needs to pay off her debt and fulfill her obligations.

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Applying a Text Relating a Situation that Could Occur but Probably Would Not

A good example of the second kind of text is in 1 Corinthians 5:1-11. In this passage, Paul speaks to a specific situation in which a man was committing adultery with his step-mother.

- a) What are some of the specifics we need to understand about this situation?
- The man was committing both adultery and incest. This is clearly a violation of God’s Word (Lev. 18:8) and an offense that would merit church discipline without repentance (1 Cor. 6:9).
 - The church members were prideful (arrogant, puffed up) and were not addressing the situation, despite the fact that the man persisted in this behavior. They may have attributed their “tolerance” to their love for him, which resulted in their pride.
 - Paul was clear that this man should be disciplined from the church because of persistent sin.
- b) What are some of the underlying principles in this passage?
- Doing nothing about persistent and unrepentant sin in the church is not an option.
 - Tolerance of sin in the church is not true love or true mercy because it is selfish in nature and is not concerned about the well-being of the other party.
 - Sin in one member affects all the members because it destroys the spirituality and credibility of the church.
 - Casting someone out of the church delivers them to Satan for judgment so that they may be punished and desire to return to the Lord
 - Someone who is excluded from the church should know that they have been excluded because they lose the intimacy of our fellowship. That doesn’t mean we don’t love them or talk to them. It means that all of our communication with them should be centered on winning them back, not pretending that nothing ever happened.
- c) Based on what you have learned from this passage, how should a church respond to the following situation:

Bob was a single man who was a member of the church. He attended every Sunday and was even the song leader at church. No one could sing as well as Bob and he definitely made their song services much more enjoyable. Bob dated someone for quite a while and brought her to church every Sunday. As is common today, they moved in together before they were married. It wasn’t a secret in the church that if they were living together that they were indulging in fornication. They both still came to church. Many people in the church prayed for Bob and felt that if they just gave him enough time that the Lord would convict him or maybe they would just get married and that would “solve” the problem. Some people had privately confronted Bob about the issue but he didn’t feel it was a big deal and he kept coming to church every week along with his girlfriend. Many in the church believed that they were demonstrating the merciful love of Christ by not seeking to discipline him from the church. What does 1 Corinthians 5:1-11 teach us about how we should handle this situation? How would your proposed solution help Bob and the church?

Bob should be approached by an individual, two or three, and then eventually by the whole church about the sin in his life. If he ignores all of these, he should be excluded from the church. This is the best way to truly love Bob and even his girlfriend. Hopefully the Lord will convict Bob and bring him to a place of repentance and restoration with the church.

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The Challenge of Cultural Relativity

When a passage addresses issues that are cultural or prescribes an action based on first-century culture, we have to be able to peel back the layers and get to the heart of the matter. It is only then that we will have the insight to apply the truth to today. Sometimes it is even challenging to know when culture is involved and when the command transcends culture. Here are seven more rules that can help us sort through passages that may or may not have elements that are cultural and then apply them.

5. Distinguish between the core of the message and secondary teachings based on the core.

Certain topics in Scriptures are undoubtedly core concepts and teachings that are independent of any cultural adaptation. Others are secondary teachings built upon the core concepts. Sometimes, the secondary teachings are absolute as well and sometimes they are cultural expressions. Try to name four core teachings and four secondary teachings in Scriptures.

Core Teachings: Examples include: Nature of Man, Love, Purity, Truth, Jesus' Deity, and the Gospel

Secondary Teachings: Examples include: Women wearing head coverings, Holy Kiss, Church Discipline, Church Government, and Spiritual Gifts

6. Distinguish between what is blatantly right or wrong and things that are only right or wrong within a given context.

It is important to not lose sight of this distinction. List five issues within Scripture that are definitely right or wrong and five things that may be right or wrong in different situations.

Always Right or Wrong: Examples include: Homosexuality, Lying, Loving your Neighbor, Faith in Christ, Prayer, Stealing

Only Right or Wrong under Certain Circumstances: Examples include: Women teaching, Eating Meat Offered to Idols, Holy Kiss, Wearing a Head Covering, Speaking in Tongues

7. Make a special note of items where the New Testament is uniform and consistent and where it reflects differences.

A good example of an item where the New Testament reflects differences is in regard to money. Compare the following passages: Luke 12:33, 18:22, and 1 Timothy 6:17-19.

How do these passages differ?

The passage in Luke instructs individuals to sell all they have while the passage in 1 Timothy allows the rich to keep their money but to use it wisely and not be selfish.

What is the reason for the difference?

Luke 12:33 – These disciples were being prepared for missionary work in the first century

Luke 18:22 – Jesus was showing this young man where his heart was at

1 Timothy 6:17-19 – This is an absolute command for us under normal circumstances.

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- 8. Differentiate between principles and an application of the principles. Sometimes a writer may use a universal principle to support a cultural application.**

The issue of women wearing head coverings in church is a great example. Before we start, let's make sure we have a proper perspective. Read the following passage:

Galatians 3:28 – “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (ESV)

Now, read 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and answer the following questions:

What are the underlying principles taught in this passage?

God and Christ are equal but have different roles. Similarly, men and women are equal but have different roles. Husbands and wives should be unified in their service to the Lord and fulfill their respective roles. A wife or husband that does not fulfill their intended role dishonors their spouse.

What are the cultural applications taught in this passage?

In the first-century Corinthian culture, men should not cover their heads while in the church setting and women should not uncover their heads while in the church setting.

How are the absolute principles and cultural applications connected?

Paul uses the absolute principles to support the cultural application in this church. We would do very similar things if we were to talk about men wearing dresses and a woman wearing a suit and tie.

- 9. Consider how many acceptable cultural options were available at the time the text was written:**
- If there was only one option and the Bible stuck with it, the option may be just cultural.**
 - If there were several options available and the Bible picked one specifically, it is more likely to be a universal principle.**
 - If the Bible resisted the existing cultural options and created a new way of doing things it is likely a universal principle.**

Let's consider examples of each of these situations:

- 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 – Wearing head coverings was the only cultural option for moral women. To be found without a head covering was to be considered immoral.
- 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 – While homosexuality was likely affirmed by some and discouraged by others, it was declared to be a sin by God.
- Galatians 3:28 – The spiritual equality of all people was NOT taught in these cultures. By teaching this principle, the Bible was establishing a universal rule to be observed at all times.

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10. Keep in mind cultural differences that affect how we apply certain passages.

Read Romans 13:1-7 and consider the type of government over the Romans. Would they apply this passage in different ways than we would today?

We live in a democratic republic that affords us the opportunity to vote on who represents us and on what policies our government should take. Not all people in Rome had this option. We must submit to our government as is proper in the Lord, but it is also proper for us to exercise our right to vote.

11. Let love rule. From time to time you will find good men and women on different sides of an issue.

I have several fellow ministers that I deeply respect but yet do not agree with them on every issue. We do share common views on the core teachings of Scriptures however, and most importantly, a common salvation. We should expect this to some degree even within our own churches. Love must rule our interactions with one another and occasionally we may have to agree to disagree.

The Challenge of having Scriptures written only by Occasion

One key principle we should reiterate is that the New Testament epistles were written on specific occasions for specific reasons. They were often answering questions asked by the churches or addressing problems within the church. This leads us to two final principles.

12. Because Epistles were written as the result of specific incidences in the churches, we don't always know everything we would like to know.

In Scripture, God gives us all we NEED, not necessarily all we WANT! A good example of this is 2 Corinthians 12:7-9. What does this passage tell us Paul's thorn in the flesh? What doesn't this passage tell us about Paul's thorn in the flesh?

We learn from this passage that God allowed Satan to afflict Paul with a thorn in the flesh to keep him humble and useful in the service of the Lord. We don't know what Paul's thorn in the flesh was. We may have lots of guesses but we can't know with certainty.

13. Sometimes we have unanswered questions because we are asking our questions rather than asking their questions.

1 Corinthians is one of the most famous examples of this problem. See 1 Corinthians 7:1. There was a specific list of questions this church had sent the Apostle Paul that we don't have today. Because of this, we have to play a bit of Jeopardy with the Bible and try to deduce the questions based on the detailed answers the Lord has given us. Despite our best efforts, we will likely only end up with probable questions and not a definitive list.