

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 –

Exegesis –

Hermeneutics –

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:

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?

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?

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?

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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?

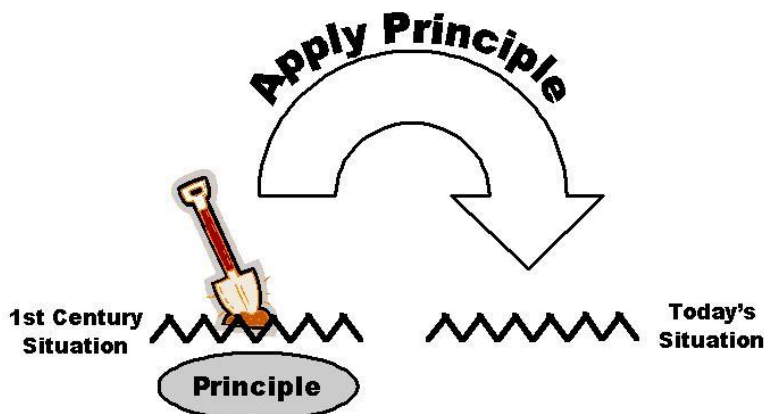
Applying a Specific Situation in Scripture to a Different Situation Today

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?

b) What are some of the underlying principles in this passage?

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?

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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?

b) What are some of the underlying principles in this passage?

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?

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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:

Secondary Teachings:

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:

Only Right or Wrong under Certain Circumstances:

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?

What is the reason for the difference?

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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?

What are the cultural applications taught in this passage?

How are the absolute principles and cultural applications connected?

- 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 –
- 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 –
- Galatians 3:28 –

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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?

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?

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.