



## PRACTICAL APPLICATION

We all want to know the relevance of God's Word for today. We understand that it is largely in the application that a sermon differs from a lecture. But are we as aware of the difference between the application of God's Word on his terms and on ours?

### PRACTICAL APPLICATION ON GOD'S TERMS

First, application on God's terms makes much of *the glory of God's person*. He fills heaven and earth and is the grand subject of Scripture and of the Christian's attention. Application is neither, then, an occasion nor an excuse to effectively dethrone or marginalize God. Rather, the Word is applied to us personally so that we may fulfil our *raison d'être* (reason for existence), which, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism (Answer 1) famously states, is to glorify and to enjoy him forever. Practical application, then, does not terminate on ourselves.

Secondly, application should make much of *the glory of God's works*. While God has revealed his works of creation, providence, and redemption because they bear on us, their disclosure is wisely intended to introduce us to a world of reality, experience, and thought so much bigger than ourselves. In the wonder and worship of this new world God directs us towards self-forgetfulness. In fact, the ability to see the world as so much bigger than ourselves is very often exactly what we need.

Thirdly, application should make much of *the glory of God's grace*. We initially hear God's Word as sinners who are offered a great Savior, yet in the gift of Christ received through faith, we obtain a new identity, nature, and focus. The more we realize God's grace in this, the more grateful obedience becomes a no-brainer and a delight. The more obedience becomes engrained the more instinctive Christian living becomes.

Fourthly, application should make much of *the glory of God's hope*. Some things are not solved in this life: some scarring, a terminal diagnosis, or the like. Faithful application may point to how a believer may triumph in

their present circumstances, but it may not eradicate all the aches and pains of this life, nor should it be expected to render null and void God's vision for the future: the utopia of perfect life in his immediate presence on the new earth. Thus, to expect preachers—and by extension preaching—to bring the eternal panacea of the future into the present is both unrealistic and unbiblical. Instant gratification is for the world, but eternal gratification is for the Christian.

### PRACTICAL APPLICATION ON OUR TERMS

The mature Christian understands that the concern for practical application can be obsessive and distorted. Such application—

*Empowers disinterest in God.* If we come to worship with a “What's in it for me?” rather than a “What's in it for God?” attitude, and then judge “our worship experience” by the consumerist interests of self, the last thing we need is to be pandered to by man-centered practical application. What such a misunderstanding of worship requires is the corrective of God-centeredness.

*Marginalizes the cross of Christ.* While the cross is not in every verse of Scripture, it is certainly anticipated throughout the Old Testament and assumed throughout the New. A staple diet of “How to . . .” sermons tends to underplay the person and work of Christ, and breeds moralism or legalism. While the preacher may follow Scripture in presupposing the cross, he does not abstract the application from it. The cross is present either implicitly or explicitly.

*Legitimizes unthinking popularism.* Weary of hearing how so much is either too difficult or too long in the anti-intellectual atmosphere of the current climate, preachers may bow to the pressure of excising the historical, doctrinal, and theological content from their sermons. Unfortunately, out of the window also goes the congregant's ability to articulate, apply, and defend the faith effectively. True, Jesus aimed at the “common man,” but he did so to afford him an uncommon understanding and application of Scripture.



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*Adopts a selective approach to Scripture.* Ironically, the most vocal and popularist calls for practical application can be the most selective in the choice of application. The selective don't mind when Scripture teaches and trains but may when it reproves and corrects (2 Tim. 3:16). Jesus offered both soothing and challenging sayings. Only his authentic disciples could stomach both (John 6:60–71). They were God's children, but knew that God loved them enough not to spoil them.

*Replaces personal application.* When mental and spiritual atrophy sets in, and we have jettisoned patience with substantive sermons, it is not long before we shall also tire of the work of personally applying the Scriptures to ourselves. Even practical sermons no longer satisfy unless they outline in detail what the sermon means for me and my life. Exhortations and general principles of application are no longer enough. The preacher must tell me what to do. By this point a sermon on Philippians 4:5 may be overdue: "Let your reasonableness be known to everyone"!



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