

Applying the Bible to Life

The Second Half of the Lesson

by James Riley Estep, Jr.

Many Sunday school teachers resist the idea of making application, perceiving their role to be a teacher of Bible content and little more. “Students should just make the lesson application themselves,” they say. “That’s not really the teacher’s responsibility.” Is that your viewpoint?

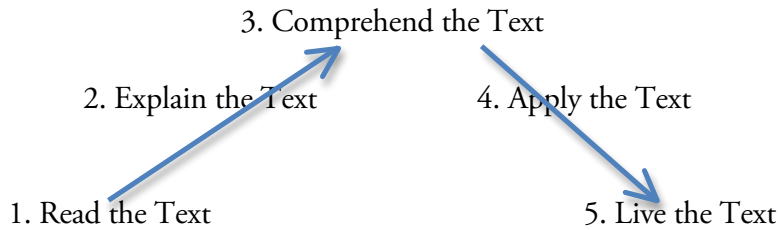
Why Teachers Hesitate

There are various reasons why teachers hesitate when it comes to application. Some teachers avoid making application to life out of fear of appearing authoritarian or intrusive into students’ personal lives. Other teachers resist making application because they don’t want to “step on people’s toes.” The result in these cases is a Bible lesson that is taught in a vague, general way. In order to avoid controversy, they avoid focus, clarity, and challenge.

If a student is offended by a suggested application to life, could that not mean that the student is living in a way that is contrary to the Scriptures? We recall this warning: “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (James 1:22). This means that teaching the Bible text is incomplete without application. Application to life is more likely to happen when the teacher recognizes his or her responsibility in this regard.

The Teacher’s Task

The simple diagram below depicts the teaching process in its most complete form. The first step, naturally, is to read the biblical text. From there we move on to explaining its meaning. This step involves coming to grips with what the Bible author intended the original readers to understand (the fancy word for this is *exegesis*).



The third step, comprehension, involves helping the student begin to see how his or her understanding of the text can form a general principle of life. This step is your vital bridge between explanation of the text and application to life. When the learner studies a passage and comprehends it (not just memorizes it), then the teacher is ready to move to application of the passage. Until comprehension is achieved, application is virtually impossible because the text is still too “distant” from the life of the learner. Our study of the passage must take us successfully through this point.

We can help our learners form these general principles of life by considering *life parallels*. How does the situation of the biblical author’s message parallel our situation today? In those parallels, how does the biblical message address the culture, congregation, and general life situation of the student? It is here the learner should begin to see similarities between the lives of biblical characters and their own regarding circumstances, challenges, and decisions.

Consider, for example, Paul’s discussion in Ephesians 2 about the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the church. That situation in and of itself is probably rather “distant” to your learners. Chances are they have never experienced a conflict between Jew and Gentile in the churches they have attended. Thus the issue by itself doesn’t carry the immediacy that it did in the first century.

However, the nature of relations between people of different races or cultural backgrounds is a very real issue in the twenty-first century. In this light, Paul’s discussion about the relationship between Jews and Gentiles informs what our response should be to twenty-first century parallels. Now the text is definitely getting closer to our life, society, and world.

After establishing a general arena of application (in this case, race and/or cross-cultural relationships), we ask ourselves, “What specific *life applications* can be made? What are students expected actually to do about it?” As teachers, we prepare for a lesson by thinking through these questions, but ultimately we have to ask how we can help students develop a specific plan for biblical life-change. It is never enough merely to draw parallels for students or have them brainstorm about possible applications before you move on to the next verse. Students must be asked, “So, what are you going to do about it? What changes

do you need to make to reflect the biblical text in your life?” After all, this is ultimately how Scripture is to affect students.

Classroom Tips

The next question is “But how do we set this process in motion in the classroom? What’s the best way to move from *general life-principle* to *specific application*?” Your lesson aims for each study should form a good starting point for you in this regard. You should have aims that deal with knowing and comprehending the lesson text (content and concept aims), but you should always also have at least one aim that addresses application (conduct aim).

There is more than one way to achieve those aims, depending on your teaching style. If you like to use a learning-activity approach, you can use that to achieve all three aims. After an attention-getter, you move to Bible study proper; this is where you achieve your content and concept aims. Follow that with an application section that seeks to achieve the conduct aim.

You can also use a discussion approach to achieve your application aim. After helping your learners comprehend the biblical message, you can lead them in a discussion of possible applications of the biblical principle. Students actively participate by suggesting parallels between the situations of the people in the Scriptures with those in our own world today. Your task is to help the students push their comprehension to application.

For example, after studying Paul’s praise of the Thessalonian church (1 Thessalonians 1:4-10), you can ask, “How does our congregation measure up to what Paul expected in a church?” After a time of class or small-group discussion, the next question can be, “How can you, individually, help our church become what God expects it to be?” This brings the biblical text into “real life” application for the student.

For an Old Testament example, consider Moses’ educational mandate in Deuteronomy 6. After addressing what this text meant for the people “back then,” you can ask students to suggest general applications of the biblical text for modern parenting or children’s ministry at the church. Classes can brainstorm possible applications, and the more the better! After the brainstorming winds down, you can ask your learners to select one possible application to put into practice in the week ahead. Thus the application can result in biblically informed life-changes.

The advantage of this kind of approach is that your learners will have a greater sense of “ownership” of the action plan because of their participation in helping create it. If you, the teacher, want to retain a bit more control during a discussion (to keep the class from going off on tangents), you can provide the

life parallels yourself. You can do this by bringing newspaper or magazine articles that address the issue at hand. If your classroom is equipped to do so, you can show video clips from a movie, documentary, or Internet site.

Keep in mind that after a period of general discussion, the lesson focus must shift to the life of the individual student. At the beginning of a discussion the teacher may ask, “What are *we* going to do about this?” but the question eventually must move to “What are *you* going to do about it?” Asking students to identify a biblical life-change they can make in the week ahead is somewhat easy given the fact that they have spent time discussing possible general applications. Moving from the general application to the specific application simply becomes a matter of determining what God wants each one of them to do about it.

The creation of a specific application also provides a point of assessment for the lesson itself: the following week the teacher simply asks students if they followed through with the application of the previous week’s lesson. This builds a sense of spiritual accountability among your class members. When application is done in this way, it becomes a natural extension of biblical study, which is exactly what it should be.

Even if your preferred teaching style is primarily lecture, you can move your class from comprehension to application by selective and occasional use of discussion questions.

Complete Interpretation

As one student has pointed out, “The interpretation of Scripture is not complete until its application is found for the reader in his or her present situation.” This means that an explanation of the Bible text must be followed by coming to grips with how that text is to be lived out.

Keep in mind that leading your students to make application of the biblical text in their own lives does not require you, the teacher, to directly make the application *for* them. Rather, your job is to assist your students in making their own applications. That’s complete interpretation!