

10: Application: Where the rubber hits the road

Reading Scripture is only faithful to the goal of Scripture (to change lives and draw us nearer to God) when it is applied to life. This section will give some simple tips for powerful application that is faithful to Scripture yet relevant today. If I cook a nice meal I would be most disappointed if none of the family ate it, however delicious they said it looked. Scripture is made up of writings that aim to change people, to help them draw nearer to God, if reading the Bible does not change how we live it is worthless by the one criterion that matters.

So, having spotted the main thing a passage was saying, its “point” (see this earlier article), and from that identified the timeless truth that undergirded the passage (see the previous article), how do we apply that truth today to change lives?

Psychology 101



Photo by Anthony Topper

Many preachers and Bible study leaders seem to believe that making the application as general as possible makes it more powerful. In fact the reverse may be true. Show a human being a rule, and we will tell you ways in which it does not apply to us. At Carey there was a rule that one ought not to park on the grass. On a rainy day when the carpark was full there were always cars on the grass. Some were teachers or students late for an important class – and therefore “exceptions” to the rule. Others were parents bringing children to the creche on a Tuesday (the day the carpark was most often full) – who, of course were worthy “exceptions”. Almost anyone could find a “good” reason...

General rules often fail to motivate us to good behaviour. On the other hand humans are natural storytellers and hearers. Tell a story and people identify with the characters. Avid readers of fiction will recognise this as a truth universally acknowledged.

So, make your application a “story”.

Real people and real magic



The Boyhood of Raleigh by Sir John Everett Millais, oil on canvas, 1870.

Duval and Hays (in *Journey into God's Word*) suggest forming a

“scenario” (a concrete illustration of the principle), which should be as realistic as possible. Ideally a true story – perhaps with names and other identifying details changed to protect people. If it is not true, then it should “ring true” (be a story we can believe would happen). If Jane, the central character, is not someone you know (under another name) then she should still be thoroughly believable. Give details as well as a name, so that people can imagine the person. Then tell how the principle (from the Bible passage) worked out in Jane’s life.

This is where the magic of stories happens. Even if Jane is an Asian teenager, and your listener is a middle-aged Pakeha (NZer of European origin or descent), somehow he will identify with her joys and pains. Her story will work on him. He will apply the principle to his own circumstances, having “seen” it apply to hers.

Now it is true that it is easier to identify with “people like us”, and our audiences are usually varied. So, don’t just think up one “scenario”, work out two or even three. Fill them with details, but above all make sure the theological truth (from Scripture) is clearly at work in the details of their lives. Your audience is more likely to generalise it to themselves.

Application in practice

This week I’ve been marking students exegeting (studying and explaining) Gen 15. There, after Abraham’s victory over the kings has been celebrated by Melchisedek, king of Salem, God again comes to speak with Abraham. At 85, Abraham is beginning to wonder if God’s promise of offspring is going to be realised. God not only reaffirms his promise, but seals a solemn covenant to confirm it.

The students spotted that the passage was “about” God showing Abraham that his promises are true and reliable (even when

their fulfillment does not seem likely). One suggested that this passage: *“stirs its audience to develop a trust in God, one that can stand firm despite severe doubts.”*

However the majority of “applications” ran something like this: *when we doubt God’s promises we should trust them because he has shown himself trustworthy.*

It is **more powerful** to tell the story of Adoniram Judson. A few years ago I was invited to teach at a Bible School in the largest refugee camp on the border of Burma. About 40% of people in the camp are Christian. When we got there we heard that they trace this astonishing church back to an American Baptist missionary Adoniram Judson. Yet three years after Judson went to Burma, he still had not baptised his first convert. Someone asked what evidence he had that his work would ever bear fruit. He replied: “As much as there is a God who will fulfill all His promises.”



It was another three years before the first convert was baptised. Yet because of his trust in God’s promises Judson lived to see a hundred churches and thousands of converts, and today there are still new churches being planted in Thailand as a result of Judson’s trust in God’s promises.

We too can trust God’s promises to us.

Homework:

Take this principle that God keeps promises and either remember or construct scenarios that illustrates this truth. Make them concrete and real(istic)!