

Theological Reflection on the Timeless Gospel Principles of the Text

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We are at the stage in our exegetical journey where we are seeking to understand how we take the correct interpretation of a passage written thousands of years ago to people long dead and apply and teach that text today, in a relevant and life transforming way. But before we learn *how* to apply the text, I need to make a case for *why* we need to understand the **Timeless Gospel Principles** first. Why would we need to understand the Timeless Gospel Principles of a text to teach or apply it? Why can't we just do and tell other people to do what God said to the original audience?

Paul says in 1st Timothy 1:5, "The aim of our instruction is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith."

Paul says this is our aim, this is our goal in ministry. Our goal is for people (ourselves included) to be motivated rightly from the inside out. Paul wants our pure hearts driving us. So we want the text to hit the heart, not just the actions. We want people to do what they do because they truly believe is it right, and so live with a clean conscience as Paul says here. That means we want ourselves and our hearers to be people of integrity whose actions are consistent with our most deeply held beliefs. We want to grow up people with strong convictions in the Word. In other words, our goal is produce sincere faith in ourselves and the people we teach. Paul's goal is for peoples' love to be driven by what they sincerely believe, that's what he's saying in this verse.

Paul says in Romans 14:23 that "everything that doesn't proceed from faith is sin." That's a strong statement. And it means that faith must motivate every single action we do that pleases God.

This is Paul's whole ministry. We could write a whole book to unpack this, but look at 2 Corinthians 4:2, "But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God."

Our goal as ministers of the gospel is never to manipulate people into doing certain actions. We're not after that. Our goal is simply that as we openly and clearly explain and proclaim God's Word, that people would see the truth for themselves and their conscience would be carried. That's what Paul is saying.

If we don't see for ourselves from the Word what we should do, then we won't be motivated by faith. We miss the whole point if we try to do or get people to do the right thing for the wrong reasons. God is always after the heart, and faith is what pleases Him.

And so that's one of the most fundamental principles in teaching and applying Scripture. In my mind I picture Justin's diagram of the Long Way Home as a bridge. We first have to walk up the first leg of the journey and figure out what the text meant to the original audience. We have to start with correct exegesis. But then we cross the bridge by finding the Timeless Gospel Principles, which is the topic of this paper. And then finally, we come down the bridge with the application of the truth to God's people today, which we will cover later. So people have to walk over that bridge from what the text meant over 2000 years ago to how it applies today.

If people can't see the implication of the truth in our text for themselves, then they can't be driven by faith. So we have to carry their conscience because the goal is always their faith. So one of the foundations in teaching and applying the Word is that in order to build faith, we have to see for ourselves what the Word means. Faith comes from the Word as Paul says in Romans 10:17, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ."

And this is actually how God designed us to live. He didn't create us to *only* follow rules. That's because you can actually follow rules without your heart being in it. You can read your Bible, go to church, give to the poor, and much more without **any faith**. But that's not the point.

God's goal is for us to do what we do by faith. I want you to see that actually God created us to live this way.

If you go back to Genesis 1:26, we find that God created us in His image in order to rule over creation for Him. Being created in God's image has everything to do with our purpose in representing God in ruling for Him over earth. God has rationality, personality, spirituality, morality, and more. And so He gave those to us so that we can rule under Him and for Him over His good creation.

You see, in God's design, He made us to think, he made us to relate to others and Himself, He made us moral and spiritual beings. Why? So that we would be able to think through and live out **what God wants** in whatever sphere God has given us responsibility. We were made to represent God, to rule for Him.

And ultimately, what this means is this: to truly obey God, you have to become like God. I want you to understand this, because this is vital. In God's design you can never properly *obey Him* without *becoming like Him*.

In God's design, to represent Him properly you have to **internalize His values**. Your heart has to care about what He cares about. To faithfully represent God, you have to know and understand Him and His plan.

To represent God in every different situation, you have to know what is important to God, what is He like, what would He want in that situation. To simply obey rules, you just have to do things on a list. It doesn't matter where your heart is. But God wants something so much more for His people.

So what does this have to do with teaching and applying the Word? Our goal isn't just to tell people what to do. That can be tempting. Our pride makes it easy to think that we know what's best for people. We can easily fall into the trap of wanting to get people to enact our vision or plans, what we think is best. We can fall into just wanting people to get stuff done. So we can get into the mode of telling people what to do. But God didn't do that to us! He told us who He is, and what He's like, and what His plan is and then gave us freedom to live that out by faith. Now of course there are rules, there are boundaries, but God wants us to be motivated by faith.

So our goal is for **people to live principled lives by faith**. We want people to grow deep convictions about who God is and what His plan is so that they will live by faith in it. The goal is for people to internalize God's values so that by faith they can live out those values as His representatives in whatever context they find themselves in.

And as a corollary of this, we don't have any authority beyond what Scripture says. We are ruling for God as His representatives. The authority is His. I recently wrote a journal about this if you want to investigate it more. We cannot go one word beyond what Scripture teaches. We have to say everything the text says, but not one word more. That's our job. We don't have that authority, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:6, "Don't go beyond what stands written."

So we must always teach the Timeless Gospel Principles of a text so that people can live principled lives of conviction by faith. And once again, that means we have to carefully walk people over the bridge from what the text meant to the original audience to a timeless principle. If people don't see for themselves that the text is teaching a timeless truth, then how could it apply today?

We want the peoples' consciences to be bound by the Word of God. We want them to see for themselves that a text has timeless implications. We want them to develop deep convictions about how the Word should shape their lives.

So we are calling this leg of the journey, where we cross the top of the diagram Theological Reflection. We start our sermon preparation journey by going up the first leg and finding what the text meant to the original audience. But then we do Theological Reflection to come up with the Timeless Gospel Principles that we are talking about now. Then we come down the last leg of the journey and apply those principles to God's people today. So we have established why we need to do Theological Reflection to come up with the Timeless Principles of the text, but now we are going to talk about how to do it. We have to think carefully and theologically about a text to understand what it is teaching that is truly timeless, and doesn't just apply to people who died over 2000 years ago, so that God's people today can live it out by faith.

We know that this is possible, because every text of Scripture is applicable. 2 Tim. 3:16 says that All Scripture is inspired by God and so is profitable. So this can be done! Every passage of Scripture is there for a reason. If we understand that reason we will see how relevant it is, even today. So our goal is to meditate and really think about our text until we wrestle from it what timeless truth the passage teaches that fits into God's character and plan for the world.

Now you may be wondering, why are we calling these Timeless Gospel Principles? What do we mean with that term? We call them principles because we want God's people to live principled lives of conviction by faith in these truths. We call them Timeless Principles because people need to see how the ancient text teaches something that still applies today. And we call them Gospel Principles, because we want people **motivated by the gospel** in everything they do.

Calling these truths Timeless Gospel Principles also contrasts with a couple of errors that can happen at this stage in sermon preparation.

And the first of these errors is moralizing the text. This is when we can so isolate a passage from the book of the Bible it's a part of that we just hear a command without understanding the underlying **gospel reasons** why we should do it.

For example, Hebrews 10:25 is the famous passage which called the recipients not to forsake gathering together. I could easily preach a sermon emphasizing that people need to be at church. And of course God values going to church. But if we aren't connecting that verse to the purpose of Hebrews, we are missing the *why*. If we don't unpack God's reasons for calling God's people to gather that text can come across moralistically.

Think for a moment. What gospel reasons and motives are we missing if we just teach Hebrews 10:25 as "Go to church." What would be the dangers of doing this? Take a moment and read Hebrews 10:25 and look for the reasons and motives in this text.

We can so easily fall into "do this and don't do that" rather than helping people understand God's values and His plan. We want people to embrace their identity as His children and want to live it out by faith. So we need to be careful about the danger of moralizing the text and just giving people commands or life tips from a text. Every passage is part of a book in the Bible that ultimately aims for the heart. My conviction is that if we understand how every passage ties into the purpose of the book it's in we will never moralize it, because no book of the Bible is moralistic.

But on the other hand, we want to beware of the second danger which we would call spiritualizing the text. And I believe people fall into this error out of a desire not to moralize the text. People inherently know that the Bible isn't just a rule book, it's not just moral principles to make your life better, it's not just tips to have peaceful relationships. The Bible is about God and His big plan of redemption! And so people have a good desire to see each text connect to Christ and the gospel. But it can easily go astray.

So this error is when we jump right to Christ, without understanding how the truth of the passage fits into the book it is in. We can subtly look for a deeper spiritual meaning that was never present in the original author's mind. And the problem with this, is that it doesn't come from the text.

It's really easy to do. But our conviction is that God's meaning is found in the human author's meaning. If the normal rules of language don't apply, what rules do apply? Is the meaning totally subjective? People come up with all kinds of connections. But there are no limits on what we can come up with.

So for example, in Augustine's take on the Good Samaritan, the man traveling on the road is Adam. His being stripped of his clothes means he lost his immortality, and his being beaten means he was persuaded to sin. The robbers are the devil, and the priest is the Law and the Levite are the prophets. Of course the Samaritan represents Jesus and the inn is the church. The two denarii the promises of this life and the life to come. And the innkeeper is the Apostle Paul.¹ It all sort of makes sense. It connects to the gospel. It's not a bad illustration. But the problem is when we make it out that that's what God was communicating, we miss the clear and powerful point God was actually making in this text.

Augustine missed it. None of those connections were in Luke or Jesus' mind. We may sound clever, and some naive people may even believe us, but we won't ultimately build faith and carry the consciences of our hearers if we treat the Bible like this. We have to have a deep conviction that God's meaning is contained in the human author's meaning, that's the mystery of the dual nature of Scripture. God supernaturally carried along the human author in such a way that what they wrote was exactly what He wanted, without violating the author's will or intentions in the process.

So we believe meaning is objective, and that meaning of a text is always determined by what the original author meant. It's disingenuous to take what someone said and change their meaning. None of us appreciate it when people do this to our words.

For example, if I tell my kids, "Eat your greens before dessert," and then I see them eating mint ice cream without eating their greens, I would say, what you are doing? And they might respond, "Dad, the ice cream is green." What would I say? "That's not what I meant, and you know it."

We can actually figure out my meaning because the normal rules of language apply. We see this all throughout the Bible. When God communicates with us He does so in human language and expects people to understand. Then He holds people responsible to obey His words. Why? Because He was clear. All throughout the Bible we see the assumption that God communicated clearly using the normal language of the human authors.

So when we are coming up with Timeless Gospel Principles, we are trying to understand what timeless principles this passage teaches us about God, His plan, His values, and our identity in Him. We call this stage Theological Reflection, because we need to really slow down to think about what underlying principle God's people are called to embrace.

So let me give you a simple example of how to do this Theological Reflection to come up with Timeless Gospel Principles. And I'm going to start with a very simple example to start with. Sometimes the connection between the passage and application is easy, sometimes it's hard.

We could say that some bridges are so short you can practically jump across them, and some bridges are those long suspended rope walking bridges you've seen in the jungle that you have to risk your life to go across.

1 <https://www.9marks.org/article/allegorical-interpretation-finding-the-line-before-you-cross-it>

So for an easy example, look at 1 Cor. 6:19-20, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."

The reason this bridge is so short for this text is that our situation for this text is nearly identical to that of the Corinthians. In that sense, if this text had been written directly to us, it would apply in the exact same way as it was written to them.

The Corinthians were Christians who were bought with a price through the death of Jesus; we are Christians bought with a price through the death of Jesus. The Corinthians' body was a temple of the Holy Spirit; our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. So the command to glorify God in our body and not commit sexual immorality applies in exactly the same way to us as it did to them.

Does that make sense? You can teach and apply that command with all the weight and force and authority of God. We should never commit sexual immorality because Jesus died for us and so bought us. We should never commit sexual immorality because the Holy Spirit lives in us. That truth has God's authority. It's as if God is speaking that verse directly to us.

Plus, we can see it in the text for ourselves. The gospel reasons why we should honor God with our body are clear. We see the reasons. Our goal in teaching and applying this text are to make those connections clear.

And finally, this approach is not moralistic. It's tied directly to the gospel of Jesus: we obey because of what He's done. It's not spiritualizing the text, it's clearly exactly what the original author meant. That's an easy bridge to cross.

Some texts take more time to reflect to understand the underlying gospel reasons and motivations for how it applies to us. But since we know that every passage in Scripture is inspired by God and useful, we know that if we meditate carefully on the passage, it will be relevant. It will grow our faith and ultimately show us how the gospel seeks to motivate us. Sometimes we just need to slow down to do Theological Reflection on the text to see how.