

The Practices & Potholes of Theological Reflection

I. Connecting every passage to God's bigger Gospel Story

Last week we saw the importance of connecting every passage in Scripture to God's bigger Gospel Story. We saw that doing this helps us:

1. **to see the unity of the Bible**, that all of these distinct smaller stories and lessons have a unique contribution as contours of God's grand story to exalt Christ by redeeming humanity to Himself for His glory.
2. **to not moralize a passage**, but to see how all the commands and lessons in Scripture are part of our purpose in reflecting and representing God, in faith in His promises and in response to His great grace for us.
3. **to see the relevance of every passage**, by understanding the larger gospel principles we see how even the OT Law gives us a worldview about God and helps us as the church relate to God in the New Covenant.

So we love Biblical Theology, which traces the grand themes of Scripture through the whole Bible and sees how they develop within God's Progressive Revelation until they culminate in Christ.

II. So the Goal is to find Timeless Gospel Principles of the text

We received a lot of good questions, going to try to answer this week. There are multiple **Timeless Gospel Principles** in each passage. They really flow from the Main Argument of a passage. They are often the individual arguments the author makes as part of his Main Argument, but they can be any timeless truth that the author explains in the text.

- The Goal is to find **principles** because we are seeking to understand God's values and plan so that we can live a principled life by faith. The Bible isn't simply a rule book because God designed us to internalize His values and become like Him. We need God's **worldview** if we are going to represent Him well in every situation we are in. The goal is to build deep **convictions** around what God values. If we don't know the 'why' we can't live by convictional faith.
- The Goal is to find **timeless** principles because we need to find truths that are relevant today, and not just 2000+ years ago. All of Scripture is God-breathed and useful, so every passage of Scripture has something timeless in it for us today (2 Tim. 3:16). If we don't understand the 'why', all of Scripture won't be relevant to us.
- The goal is to find **gospel** principles because we need to understand the underlying reasons if the Spirit is going to powerfully transform us to be like Christ. The gospel alone has the power to transform and motivate us to live like Christ. If we don't know the 'why', the power of the gospel won't be present in our motivations.

III. Two shocking texts that show the importance of principalizing Scripture

The key question when principalizing Scripture to ask is "Why did the author say this?" What heart change, worldview shift, or value appreciation is the author going for?

- A. Table Exercise: Read Matthew 12:1-8 together at your table and answer the following questions:

How does Jesus approach the Old Testament?

What is so shocking/surprising about Jesus' response (both back then and also today)?

- B. Implication of Matthew 12:1-8

Jesus directly says that David and the priests broke the Law, and yet were right in doing so! Jesus ultimately backs up the reason that this was ok is that God desires mercy, not sacrifice. In other words, God doesn't need people to obey Him. The laws in that sense are for us. Jesus is showing us here that the Law was always meant to teach people how to love. -

Matthew 12:3-7

But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he became hungry, he and his companions, how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat nor for those with him, but for the priests alone? Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent? But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, 'I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent."

- C. Leviticus 10:1-20 is another amazing text on the importance of understanding the principles behind God's Word

Eleazar and Ithamar directly broke Moses' direct command *right after* their brothers were consumed by fire for rebelling! But Nadab and Abihu dishonored Yahweh in being irreverent (strange fire, drunkenness), but they broke the command because they were seeking to honor Yahweh in it. So God honored them through Moses for their heart motive, even in disobeying His command. -

Leviticus 10:19-20

But Aaron spoke to Moses, "Behold, this very day they presented their sin offering and their burnt offering before the Lord. When things like these happened to me, if I had eaten a sin offering today, would it have been good in the sight of the Lord?" When Moses heard that, it seemed good in his sight.

- D. These passages show us that God made us to internalize His values and represent Him

God has never been about people just following rules. The rules were meant to show God's values and heart. His goal has always been for people to care about what He loves, internalize His values, and represent Him. -

Genesis 1:26-27

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

- E. Jesus didn't reinterpret the OT in the Sermon on the Mount, He showed how it was always meant to be taken

The sermon on the mount shows that the OT Law was always meant to be about the heart. -

Matthew 5:19, 27-28

Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

- F. Principalizing Scripture isn't simply spiritualizing a text, jumping straight to Jesus, or finding some other subjective connection

Principalizing Scripture is about understanding the real heart purpose and original intent behind a text. If we believe that God has always been after our hearts (as is clear in Scripture), then no passage of Scripture, no command, no rule, was ever originally intended just to modify behavior. It's evident even from studying the very first books of the Bible ever written (the Torah), that God wasn't after external obedience. He was always after the heart which comes through the transformation of the mind (Deut. 6:5-6; etc.).

IV. The Practice of finding the Timeless Gospel Principles

- A. Why did the author say this?

Keep meditating on what heart change this text was going for. How does the text encourage us to think about God? How does it reveal His plan? What values of God do we see in the text? How do we better understand . Is there something the text is encouraging us to take faith in?

- B. Timeless Gospel Principles are found by connecting passages to their book

If you jump right from a passage to the bigger gospel story, you will often miss the theological point of the passage. You must first understand how a passage fits into the book that it's in and understand it's theology in context.

Once you understand the principle the passage is making in its context, **then and only then** can we properly fit into the bigger Gospel Story. It takes hard work to understand how a passage fits into the purpose of the book it's in. But don't settle for a shortcut! But if we see how a passage fits into the book it's in, it will always have a gospel purpose since no book of the Bible is merely moralistic.

C. Timeless Gospel Principles tie into God's Big Story

Once we find the Timeless Gospel Principle of a text, it will tie into the major themes of Scripture that are part of the Bible's Grand Story. For example, if we have a text in Judges that is showing how all the people did what was right in their own eyes and there was no king (Judg. 18:1; 19:1; 21:25), their wickedness points to the need for Israel to have a righteous king, which is promised in their Messiah. If we are in a text where there is a big emphasis on the covenants, we know that ultimately God has inaugurated the New Covenant will fully and finally keep all His promises when Christ comes again.

There are also types in Scripture. Usually these will also be themes that we see culminated in later revelation. For example, the tabernacle and temple were places where God dwelt. We find in the New Testament that we are the temple because the Spirit dwells in us (1 Cor. 6:19). Ultimately our hope is the full and final dwelling that God will fulfill when we are forever with the Lord (Rev. 21:2-3).

D. The text drives theology and not the other way around

There is a big danger of allowing the big picture to overrule individual texts. At the Bible College I taught at unfortunately I saw several former students and even fellow teachers fall into this trap.

Sometimes you may hear the phrase, "Scripture interprets Scripture." By that people mean that since Scripture doesn't contradict itself because it is all written by God, we can take a clear passage to interpret an unclear passage. In theory that is ok, but in practice all that does is flatline the Bible. It causes your theology to silence passages that don't seem to fit with your preconceived idea of what they should mean, your theology, or your understanding of the storyline of the Bible.

Rather, our goal is to wrestle with a passage and let it shape our theology. If a passage doesn't seem to fit our theology or understanding of the storyline of Scripture, maybe our theology or understanding of the big picture is wrong. Theology and the Big Picture are very helpful tools, but they are bad masters. We must let each individual text speak clearly and whenever the supposed context, theology, or big picture make a text more confusing rather than more clear, it is likely that the overarching understanding is wrong.

V. The Potholes

As we saw last week, there are two primary pitfalls when seeking to find the Timeless Gospel Principles of the text.

A. Moralizing the Text

Because of the desire to find every passage in Scripture as relevant, it's easy to simply take what the text meant to the original audience and apply it directly to us. This is focused on outward conformity to rules. Now of course, God does want us to care about His rules. But more so, He wants us to care about the intent and heart behind the rules.

B. Spiritualizing/allegorizing the Text

Because of the desire not to moralize the text, many react and try to connect a text right to Jesus and the gospel. But this comes with dangers too.

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. 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.

Every passage connects to God's big Gospel Story, but every passage doesn't connect *directly* to the cross. Some passages have *indirect* connections. If a passage is about sin, forgiveness, holiness, and God's wrath, well then of course there is a more direct connection to the cross. But if a passage is talking more about stewardship and how everything is God's, or wisdom with our speech, the connection will be more remote.

VI. Examples

- A. A short bridge - "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" (1 Cor. 6:19-20)

What makes this 'application bridge' short is that our situation is the same for the context of this verse as the original recipients. The logic applies the same way to *us* as it did to *them*. We are Christians who have been redeemed by Christ, just like they were. We have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us just like they did. And so we too should honor Christ with our bodies like they should have. The application of this text has the full weight and authority of Scripture on us.

- B. A long bridge - "Don't boil a goat in its mother's milk" (Deut. 14:29)

Is this text connected to Jesus and the gospel? Yes, but not immediately!

- i. How could you spiritualize this text?

Maybe boiling a goat in its mother's milk is a picture of how we should always show appreciation for our mothers' cooking. They raised us, and so we should honor them!

- ii. How could you moralize this text?

Orthodox Jews moralize this text and say you can't eat milk and cheese together. You literally can't order a cheeseburger in the McDonalds in Israel. You can order ice cream. You can order a hamburger, but not together. Ultra Orthodox Jews literally have two refrigerators because of this verse.

iii. Crossing the bridge

- a. We **first** have to understand what the text meant to the original audience

If we study the cultural background, what we find is that boiling a young goat in its mother's milk was an ancient Canaanite fertility practice. The Canaanites worshiped Baal, the storm god. They depended on the rain for their crops, and so worshiping Baal was very tempting for them

The worship of Baal was grotesque. They believed the rain was Baal's semen, sent to fertilize the ground. And so the worship of Baal involved all kinds of fertility imagery. That's why they sacrificed babies. That's why they had cult prostitutes. Babies, sex, semen, and milk were all part of worshiping Baal.

And so this command in Deuteronomy is prohibiting participating in any way with this fertility cult. That's what this text meant to the original hearers.

- b. Then we can mediate on **why** God said that to find the **Timeless Gospel Principle**

So the Timeless Gospel Principle here is to trust Yahweh alone because He demands exclusive worship. Yahweh will care for us for rain, not Baal. So we worship and trust Him alone, not other gods.

- c. We **confirm** this is the correct interpretation and principle by seeing how it fits into **its book**

God explains in great detail in chapter 11 how Israel should trust Him for the rain. He tells them to exclusively trust and worship Him over and over in Deuteronomy. So this isn't some ancillary idea we just came up with. We know it's the correct interpretation and principle because it fits perfectly into the purpose, flow, and emphases of Deuteronomy. As Moses says at the heart of the book in 6:13-14, "It is Yahweh your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear. You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you."

- d. We can now fit this principle into the **grand Gospel Story**

We can see that God has always saved people by faith and through trusting Him. It's always been God's method of salvation because it glorifies Him as the ultimate Giver. He has always been an exclusive God who demands exclusive worship because of how glorious He is. There is no other way to the Father except through Jesus, His means of salvation!

- e. We know our principle will be **gospel centered** if it fits into the book because no book of the Bible is moralistic!

It will be incredibly relevant because every book of the Bible was written to address the hearts of its recipients.

f. The **Application** of the Text flows out of the **Timeless Gospel Principle**

The Timeless Gospel Principle of this text is that God demands exclusive trust and worship. There are myriads upon myriads of good applications. How many ways can we fail to trust and worship God exclusively? In how many ways can we too mix worship of God with trusting in other things? We could apply this gospel principle to trusting God with our finances. That would be a fitting application since worship of Baal involved their means of their production.

g. How **relevant and life transforming** is God's Word!

We went from "Don't boil a goat in its mother's milk" to "Trust God completely for your job and provision" because He demands exclusive worship as our awesome Lord and proves we can trust Him as our faithful Provider.

C. Other examples of foreign situations with **massively important implications** today

It's easy to find Old Testament examples that seem less relevant today. Obviously we don't offer sacrifices, or forbid wearing clothing with mixed fabrics. But even in the New Testament we need to principle texts to cross the bridge to how the text applies to us today.

i. Food sacrificed to idols is no longer a big issue in the church today (Rom. 14:1-4)

- The gospel makes us acceptable to God by faith. How then could we judge someone who is living by faith on something that isn't clear?
- If the goal is to build our faith, then getting someone to go against their conscience doesn't further God's purpose!

ii. Philemon is an entreaty by Paul for a slave master to free his slave (Philem. 1:12-18)

- While Onesimus would have been useful to Paul in his gospel mission, God cares about the manner. We never want to steamroll people into advancing our mission, since their faith is God's mission!
- Since the goal is another about how to appeal to someone rather than commanding them.
- All people are equal and treasured in the gospel. Our value comes from our usefulness to Christ, not in how society views us.

iii. We probably won't have Gentile widows being ignored by the church over Jewish ones (Acts 6:1-4)

- The leadership of the church should be devoted to the Word and prayer
- But caring for the needs of the church is still vital, and godly and qualified servants are vital to care for the body

- It's easy for minorities to be overlooked because the majority doesn't feel their concerns. It's important for the church to care for the needs of all people, especially the most needy
- iv. What do you think is the most seemingly irrelevant passage to us today?

VII. Discussion Questions

1. What Timeless Gospel Principles did you find in Ephesians 4:17-24? Let each person share at least one they found.
2. Go through and help each other see how *tying these principles to the main point* of Ephesians helps us to see how they fit into God's bigger Gospel Story. In other words, what is the point of 4:17-24 in light of the whole book of Ephesians?
3. Work through and explain the motivations and reasons for these principles that tie back to the Gospel Story. In other words, **why** should you embrace this principle by faith? How does what you saw in the previous question motivate you to live?