

Chapter 4

Bring the Bible Home to Your Heart

We all want to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22). Who wants to feel the failure or share in the shame of being pegged like one “who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror . . . and goes away and at once forgets what he was like” (James 1:23–24)? It would seem like Bible application is an essential spiritual discipline to consciously pursue every time we encounter God’s word—but that depends on how we define “application.”

The key question we need to answer in this chapter is what effect should regular Bible intake have on our hearts and lives—and *how* does it happen?

God’s Word Is for You

For starters, we should be clear that aiming to apply God’s words to our lives is grounded in the good instinct that *the Bible is for us*. Optimism about life application makes good on these amazing claims that *all the Scriptures* are for Christians:

- “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17).
- “Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. . . . They were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor. 10:6, 11).
- “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4).

The whole Bible is for the whole church. We have good scriptural warrant to come to God’s words expecting them to be understandable and applicable. We should make good on Puritan preacher Thomas Watson’s counsel when we open the Book,

Take every word as spoken to yourselves. When the word thunders against sin, think thus: “God means my sins;” when it presseth any duty, “God intends me in this.” Many put off Scripture from themselves, as if it only concerned those who lived in the time when it was written; but if you intend to profit by the word, bring it home to yourselves: a medicine will do no good, unless it be applied.¹

Yes, take every word as spoken to yourself, with this essential anchor in place: Seek to understand first how God’s words fell on the original hearers, and how they relate to Jesus’s person and work, and then bring them home to yourself. Expect application to your life as God speaks to us today through the Spirit-illuminated understanding of what the inspired human author said to his original readers in the biblical text.

¹ Quoted in Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 71.

Specific Applications for Every Day?

So then, is it right to think of “application” as an everyday means of God’s grace? Is this a spiritual discipline to be pursued with every Bible encounter? The answer is yes and no, depending on what we mean by *application*.

Some good teachers say that every encounter with God’s word should include at least one specific application to our lives—some particular addition, however small, to who we are or to our daily to-do list. There is a wise intention in this: pressing ourselves to be not just hearers of God’s word, but doers. But such a simplistic approach to application overlooks the more complex nature of the Christian life—and how true and lasting change happens in a less straightforward way than we may be prone to think.

It helps to acknowledge that the vast majority of our lives are lived spontaneously. More than 99 percent of our daily decisions about this and that happen without any immediate reflection. We just act. Our lives flow from the kind of person we are—the kind of person we have become—rather than some succession of time-outs for reflection.

And this is precisely the line along which the apostle prays for us. He asks not that God give us simple obedience to a clear to-do list of commands, but that he give us wisdom to discern his will as we encounter life’s many choices coming at us without pause. Paul prays

- that you would be “transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2);
- that your love may “abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent” (Phil. 1:9–10);

- that you “may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col. 1:9–10).

Rather than dictating specific actions, the apostle wants to see us formed into the kind of persons who are able to “discern what is pleasing to the Lord” (Eph. 5:10), and then act in light of it.

God’s Word Is for Seeing

And so, as John Piper says, “A godly life is lived out of an astonished heart—a heart that is astonished at grace. We go to the Bible to be astonished, to be amazed at God and Christ and the cross and grace and the gospel.”² The kind of application most important to pursue in encountering God’s word is such astonishment. Press the Scriptures to your soul. Pray for the awakening of your affections. Bring the Bible home to your heart. It’s really just another way of commending meditation.

As we’re freshly captivated by the grandeur of our God and his gospel, we become what we behold: “We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). And so we come away from our Bible intake with a more satisfied soul, which imparts a flavor and demeanor to our lives and decision-making that affects everything.

Meditating on God’s words shapes our soul. Sometimes it yields immediate and specific points of application—embrace them when they come. But be careful not to let the drive for specific actions alter the focus of our devotions from astonishment and seeking to have your soul happy in the Lord. Coming

² “Must Bible Reading Always End with Application?,” *Ask Pastor John*, episode 26, desiring God.org, February 13, 2013, <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/must-bible-reading-always-end-with-application>.

to the Scriptures to see and feel makes for a drastically different approach than primarily coming to do.

The Bible is gloriously for us, but it is not mainly about us. We come most deeply because of *whom* we will see, not for what we must do. “Become a kind of person,” counsels Piper, “don’t amass a long list.”³

The Blessing of Bringing It Home

This is the pathway to flourishing we catch a glimpse of in the old covenant in Joshua 1:8—meditation, then application, then blessing:

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.

When Bible reading first aims at astonishment (meditation and worship), it works first on our hearts and changes our person, which then prepares us for application. And application of God’s words to our lives prepares us for God’s blessing of our souls: “Your way [will be] prosperous, and then you will have good success.” So applying God’s words to our lives is not only an effect of his grace to us, but also a means to more grace.

Jesus says in John 13:17, “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.” So also James 1:25 promises that someone who is not a hearer only but “a doer who acts . . . will be blessed in his doing.”

When we bring God’s words home to our hearts, and then apply them to our lives through an amazed and changed heart, it is a great means of his grace to us. He loves to bless the true application of his word to our lives.

³Ibid.