Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

What Does This Verse Mean "to Me"?
Scripture: Titus 1:9, Romans 12:1-2
Code: A329

John MacArthur

That's a fashionable concern, judging from the trends in devotional booklets, home Bible study discussions, Sunday-school literature, and most popular preaching.

The question of what Scripture means has taken a back seat to the issue of what it means "**to me**."

The difference may seem insignificant at first. Nevertheless, our obsession with the Scripture's applicability reflects a fundamental weakness. We have adopted practicality as the ultimate judge of the worth of God's Word. We bury ourselves in passages that overtly relate to daily living, and ignore those that don't.

Early in my ministry, I made a conscious commitment to biblical preaching. My first priority has always been to answer the question, "What does this passage mean?" After I've explained as clearly and accurately as possible the meaning of God's Word, then I exhort people to obey and apply it to their own lives.

The Bible speaks for itself to the human heart; it is not my role as a preacher to try to tailor the message. That's why I preach my way through entire books of the Bible, dealing carefully with each verse and phrase-even though that occasionally means spending time in passages that don't readily lend themselves to anecdotal or motivational messages.

I am grateful to the Lord for the way He has used this expository approach in our church and in the lives of our radio listeners.

But now and then someone tells me frankly that my preaching needs to be less doctrinal and more practical.

Practical application is vital. I don't want to minimize its importance. But the distinction between doctrinal and practical truth is artificial; doctrine **is** practical! In fact, nothing is **more** practical than sound doctrine.

Too many Christians view doctrine as heady and theoretical. They have dismissed doctrinal passages as unimportant, divisive, threatening, or simply impractical. A best-selling Christian book I just read warns readers to be on guard against preachers whose emphasis is on **interpreting** Scripture rather than **applying** it.

Wait a minute. Is that wise counsel? No it is not.

There is no danger of irrelevant doctrine; the real threat is an undoctrinal attempt at relevance. Application not based on solid interpretation has led Christians into all kinds of confusion.

No discipline is more sorely needed in the contemporary church than expositional biblical teaching. Too many have bought the lie that doctrine is something abstract and threatening, unrelated to daily life.

It is in vogue to substitute psychology and spoon-fed application for doctrinal substance, while demeaning theological and expositional ministry.

But the pastor who turns away from preaching sound doctrine abdicates the primary responsibility of an elder: "holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict" (Titus 1:9).

Practical insights, gimmicks, and illustrations mean little if they're not attached to divine principles. There's no basis for godly behavior apart from the truth of God's Word.

There are only three options: We teach truth, error, or nothing at all.

Before the preacher asks anyone to perform a certain duty, he must first deal with doctrine. He must develop his message around theological themes and draw out the principles of the texts. Then the truth can be applied.

Romans provides the clearest biblical example. Paul didn't give any exhortation until he had given eleven chapters of theology.

He scaled incredible heights of truth, culminating in 11:33-36: "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen."

Then in chapter 12, he turned immediately to the practical consequences of the doctrine of the first 11 chapters. No passage in Scripture captures the Christian's responsibility to the truth more clearly than

Romans 12:1-2. There, building on eleven chapters of profound doctrine, Paul calls each believer to a supreme act of spiritual worship-giving oneself as a living sacrifice. Doctrine gives rise to dedication to Christ, the greatest practical act. And the remainder of the book of Romans goes on to explain the many practical outworkings of one's dedication to Christ.

Paul followed the same pattern in Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and 1 Thessalonians. The doctrinal message came first. Upon that foundation he built the practical application, making the logical connection with the word **therefore** (Rom. 12:1; Gal. 5:1; Eph. 4:1; Phil. 2:1) or **then** (Col. 3:1; 1 Thess. 4:1).

True doctrine transforms behavior as it is woven into the fabric of everyday life. But it must be understood if it is to have its impact. The real challenge of the ministry is to dispense the truth clearly and accurately. Practical application comes easily by comparison.

No believer can apply truth he doesn't know. Those who don't understand what the Bible really says about marriage, divorce, family, child-rearing, discipline, money, debt, work, service to Christ, eternal rewards, helping the poor, caring for widows, respecting government, and other teachings won't be able to apply it.

Those who don't know what the Bible teaches about salvation cannot be saved. Those who don't know what the Bible teaches about holiness are incapable of dealing with sin. Thus they are unable to live fully to their own blessedness and God's glory.

The nucleus of all that is truly practical is sown up in the teaching of Scripture. We don't make the Bible relevant; it is inherently so, simply because it is God's Word. And after all, how can anything God says be irrelevant?

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2015 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).