

Your Role in Expository Preaching, Part 3: Application

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: A387

Probably the biggest criticism against expository preaching is that it doesn't provide enough application. Ever heard that complaint? John MacArthur hears it all the time! Perhaps you've felt that way yourself.

Many critics decry expository preaching because they think it lacks contemporary relevance and clear, personal application to Christians. Is that true? Do they have a valid criticism? Well, the answer really depends on the nature of preaching. If you see clearly what preaching is all about, it will help you understand your preacher's responsibility, and your own as well, in the vital issue of sermon application.

Your Preacher's Role in Sermon Application

While some expositional preaching does lack the applicational dimension, most of the criticism appears to reflect a misunderstanding of, or even disbelief in, two fundamental issues: the inherent power of God's Word and the role of the Holy Spirit. What a man believes about those two things will determine how he preaches.

Expositors who trust implicitly in the power and sufficiency of God's Word, and believe in the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, take a unique approach to preaching. Their primary concern is to clarify the *meaning* of the text; finding unforgettable illustrations and providing catchy application formulas are a little lower on the list. There seems to be enough of that kind of preaching today, and most of it is shallow and insipid.

Instead, the true expositor depends on the sheer power of the biblical text itself. When he has done all he can to ensure a text is properly understood in its context, the faithful expositor has the freedom to provide more specific ways for his hearers to apply the text.

The real work of applying one sermon from the ancient text of Scripture to many hearers in a contemporary context is ultimately the purview of the Holy Spirit. No preacher can fulfill that role—he can't even come close! How could any human preacher *possibly* apply a biblical passage to the multiple and diverse situations of each member of a congregation? Only the Holy Spirit—the divine Author of Scripture and the One who knows each and every human heart—is able to take His Word and bring true conviction and lasting change to individual hearts in specific situations.

Therefore, armed with the knowledge that God's Word is powerful and the Holy Spirit is at work, your preacher's main task is to make the biblical passage plain and clear. John Leith finds that principle at work in the effective preaching of John Calvin: "Calvin sought to make the biblical message clear so that under the power of the Holy Spirit it could make hearers alive to God's presence." [John Leith,

“Calvin’s Doctrine of the Proclamation of the Word and Its Significance for Today in the Light of Recent Research,” *Review and Expositor* 86 (1989): 38].

So, is your pastor absolved of his responsibility to work at sermon application? No, not at all. But your pastor labors under limitations the Holy Spirit doesn’t have. Your pastor is doing well when he rightly divides the Word of Truth and communicates it in a way that’s clear and plain (cf. 2 Tim. 2:15). Look ultimately to the Spirit, not to your pastor, to apply the sermons you hear. He is at work already to help you understand what you hear, and He is divinely able to convict you of sin, produce repentance, and enable you to live righteously.

Your Role in Sermon Application

Obviously, you, the hearer, have a major role in the application process. Yes, it’s the preacher’s duty to be clear, plain, and direct about the meaning of the passage. Yes, the Holy Spirit is deeply involved in sanctifying you; but it is ultimately your task to think about how each message should take shape in your heart and life.

Your responsibility in applying Scripture to your life is more serious than you might think. Jesus said, only “he who *does* the will of My Father in heaven” will enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 7:21; emphasis mine). Only those who hear the words of the Lord *and act on them* will survive the storms of life and stand before God in final judgment (cf. Matthew 7:21-27).

Sound serious? It truly is. So let me help you get a handle on personal application—it starts and ends with prayer.

Pray, first of all, for understanding. Jay Adams suggests that the listener should “constantly seek to discover God’s message in the verse or verses from which it was preached, going so far as to summarize it in one sentence. [...] Unless you can do this, it is doubtful whether you got the message” (Jay Adams, *A Consumer’s Guide to Preaching*, 47). In other words, if you don’t grasp the principles of the text taught in the sermon, you won’t understand how to apply them in your life.

When Jesus declared to His disciples, “He who has ears, let him hear” (cf. Revelation 2-3), He was setting forth a general principle. The Spirit can help you train your ears to hear the Word of God. Take responsibility for understanding the specific truth you’ve been taught in the sermon, ask God to help you understand it, and then work diligently to apply it to your life.

Pray, secondly, for wisdom in application. Don’t rely on the preacher—or anything else outside of your own living, dynamic relationship with the Spirit of God—to tell you precisely how to repent of your sin and pursue holiness before Him. Ask God to teach you and show you how to apply His truth to your life. As you recognize your dependence and ask for divine assistance, you’ll find the essential resources you need to change and grow spiritually (Matthew 7:7-11).

It’s not hard at all to understand the significance here. No matter how good and wise your pastor is, would you rather have a limited, fallible man tell you how to apply the Scripture to your life, or have the infinite, perfect, all-wise, all-knowing God show you what to do with His Word? Obvious, isn’t it.

God—by His Word and Spirit, using the preacher as His mouthpiece—is quite capable of applying Scripture to your deepest needs. Like no one else, He can show you what you must do to change and grow. So pray and ask God to help you understand the truth in the sermons you hear. And ask God to give you wisdom to apply the truth to your life. Request biblical clarity for the purpose of life application and change. God is certain to answer your sincere prayers for His help in pleasing Him.

The Holy Bible is the most important book that has ever been written. In it God revealed Himself to us that we might be saved from His wrath and enjoy His glory forever. Every Sunday, in Christian pulpits throughout the world, faithful men expound passages from that holy book. Our job is to anticipate each sermon, give it our undivided attention, and then apply what we learn to our lives. Only then will we maximize the spiritual benefits to ourselves and others, and bring glory and honor to the God who gave us His written Word.

Adapted from the Epilogue, by Lance Quinn, in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, edited by John MacArthur, ©1992, used by permission.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2024 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<https://www.gty.org/about#copyright>).