

# Understanding Scripture



## Important Terms

**Exegesis** | “The careful, systematic study of the Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning.” (Fee & Stuart, 23)

**Eisegesis** | “The interpretation of a text by reading into it one’s own ideas.” (Mirriam-Webster)

**Hermeneutics** | The search “for the contemporary relevance of ancient texts.” (Fee & Stuart, 29)

**Historical Context** | “The time and culture of the author and his readers, that is, the geographical, topographical, and political factors that are relevant to the author’s setting; and the occasion [reason for writing] of the book.” (Fee & Stuart, 26)

**Literary Context** | “The texts that surround the passage you are studying.” (Duvall & Hays, 118)

## Asking the Right Questions

What are some of the pros and cons of reading the Scriptures from a strictly devotional point of view?

What is “the plain meaning of the text”?

The key to good exegesis...is to learn to read the text carefully and to ask the right questions of the text.  
--Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart

## Question One: What Am I Reading?

What are some of the different genres of literature found in the Bible?

What is a parable?

What are the general characteristics of a parable?

### Question Two: What Do I See?

What to look for in the text:

Repetition of words or phrases	Proper nouns	Verbs
Comparisons and/or contrasts	Questions and answers	Adjectives
Lists	Dialogue	Pronouns and their antecedents
Cause and effect	Means	Actions/roles of God and/or people
Figures of speech	Purpose and/or result statements	Emotional terms
Conjunctions	Conditional clauses	Tone and mood

### Question Three: What Is the Literary Context?

What is so important about context?

### Question Four: What is the Historical Context?

What is historical context?

Historical-cultural context includes information about the author and the audience—their background, circumstances, and relationship—as well as geographical, social, religious, economic, and political elements connected to the passage.

--Duvall & Hays

### The questions of historical context:

What do we take for granted today that didn't exist when this book was written?

Who was the biblical author?

Who were the first, intended readers of the book?

What was the political situation like at the time and place this book was written?

How does the geography of the land influence the text?

What were the relevant social customs of surrounding cultures?

What are the relevant religious practices of the text?

### **Question Five: What is the Biblical Context?**

What is biblical context?

In what ways can a particular passage fit into, or tie together with, the rest of the Bible?

### **Question Six: What Is the Biblical Principle of this Passage?**

What are we looking for when trying to identify the biblical principle?

Asking the exegetical questions of the Parable of the Good Samaritan:

What are we reading?

What do we see?

What is the literary context?

What is the historical context?

What is the biblical context?

What is the principle of the text?

### **Question Seven: How Do I Apply This to My Life?**

What is the point of studying the Bible?

How do we apply the text to our lives?

How can you specifically apply the Parable of the Good Samaritan to your life?

## Seven Good Questions of Exegesis

1. What am I reading?
2. What do I see?
3. What is the literary context?
4. What is the historical context of this passage?
5. What is the biblical context of this passage?
6. What is the principle of this passage?
7. How do I apply this to my life?

## Suggested Resources

**J. Scott Duvall & J. Daniel Hays** | Grasping God's Word

**Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart** | How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth

**Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart** | How to Read the Bible Book by Book

**Leland Ryken** | How to Read the Bible as Literature

**Eugene Peterson** | The Invitation

**Kevin Vanhoozer** | Is There Meaning in this Text?

**D.A. Carson** | Exegetical Fallacies

**Everett Ferguson** | Backgrounds of Early Christianity

**Roland Devaux** | Ancient Israel: It's Life and Institutions

**Equipping Ministry Journal** | [www.heritagecc.org/equipping-weblog/](http://www.heritagecc.org/equipping-weblog/)

**Heritage Suggested Commentaries** | [www.heritagecc.org/commentaries-references](http://www.heritagecc.org/commentaries-references)

**Best Commentaries** | [www.bestcommentaries.com](http://www.bestcommentaries.com)

**Learn Greek and Hebrew!**

## The Parable of the Good Samaritan | Luke 10:30-36

30In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers.

They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. 31A priest happened to be

going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. 32So too, a Levite, when

he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where

the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring

on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. 35The next

day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will

reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

36"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

## The Parable of the Good Samaritan | An Early Interpretation

*A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho* = Adam

*Jerusalem* = the heavenly city of peace, from which Adam fell

*Jericho* = the moon, and thereby signifies Adam's mortality

*Robbers* = the devil and his angels

*Stripped him* = of his immortality

*Beat him* = by persuading him to sin

*Leaving him half dead* = as a man he lives, but he died spiritually; therefore he is half dead

*The priest and the Levite* = the priesthood and the ministry of the OT

*The Samaritan* = is said to mean Guardian; therefore Christ himself is meant

*Bandaged his wounds* = binding the restraint of sin

*Oil* = comfort of good hope

*Wine* = exhortation to work with a fervent spirit

*Donkey* = the flesh of Christ's incarnation

*Inn* = the Church

*The next day* = after the Resurrection

*Two silver coins* = promise of this life and the life to come

*Innkeeper* = Paul

### Applying the Bible – Part 1: What is application?

---

While the Bible has immense value as a piece of literature, and can give great insight into certain aspects of ancient history and culture, this is not the reason most Christians read it. Ultimately, most Christians read the Bible because we believe that it is God's word, not only to a people in a time and culture far removed from our own, but that it is God's word to us in our time and in our culture. We believe that through the Bible we may come to a true knowledge of God and of ourselves, and may come to discern His will, including what He would have us believe and how He would have us live.

The process by which we go from understanding the Bible in its literary and historical context to bringing the message of the Bible to bear on our contemporary situation is called application. It should be the next to last step in Bible study, following the proper study of a text to determine its meaning, and it should result in the conforming of your life and thought to the word of God. After all, why would we go through the process of understanding and applying the Bible if we're not going to obey it (see Matt 7:24-27, 1 John 2:3, etc)?

Before discussing how to apply the Bible, it will be helpful to understand what to expect from application, and some barriers that often hinder proper application.

### What to Expect

---

How should I live? (or "Practical" Application) – Much of the Bible deals with the questions of what God expects from His people. Whether the command is to "make a parapet around your roof" (Deut. 22:8) or to "be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other" (Eph. 4:32), there is an expectation that living in obedience to God will involve conformity to His standards. For the original hearers, this would mean that not making a parapet or not forgiving each other would be an act of disobedience to God. When we seek to apply the passage today, our desire is for the same obedience to God, though proper application may result in quite different actions for us than it did for them (see Part 2 for examples). Beyond specific commands, application can give us the wisdom needed to make decisions in life.

How should I think? (or Theology/Worldview Formation) – Oftentimes, properly applying a passage will have a more direct result on the way you think and believe, rather than what you do (although your thoughts and beliefs will inevitably impact your actions). This is an underappreciated aspect of biblical application, but is quite important. While the Bible speaks directly to many areas of life, there are also many areas which the Bible does not directly address. Does this mean that the Bible has no relevance or that we cannot know the will of God in these areas? That's not the case at all. By allowing the Bible to shape our view of life and reality, our values and actions will be less conformed to our surrounding culture, and instead be transformed into that which is consistent with the revealed will of God. This type of application goes beyond a superficial application of a specific verse to complex social, economic, political, and scientific issues. Instead it allows you to use your renewed and biblically-informed mind to think through these issues in a faithful manner. Understanding what the Bible teaches about God, humanity, creation, fall, redemption, restoration, judgment, good, evil, suffering, etc., will form the lens with which you view reality and will help you see clearly as you think through the issues we face today. There are two topics under this category that deserve special attention:

*Who is God?* – Answering this question should be your primary goal when studying the Bible. Not just knowing who God is in name, but knowing Him. Knowing His character, His story, His works, His likes and His dislikes. As your knowledge of Him increases, so also will your love and fear of Him. This knowledge of God is the foundation of a biblical view of life. After all, this is eternal life (John 17:3) and the source of all true wisdom for living (Prov. 1:7; 9:10). The application of every passage of the Bible should begin with the question, "What does this tell me about God?"

*Who am I?* – Along with a proper understanding of God, the Bible will shed light on who we are (both individually and collectively). Throughout the Bible, we gain insight into the glory of a humanity which was created in the image of God, and the marring of that image through human sin. We come to understand ourselves in relation to God, and see the depths of our own sin exposed by the light of Scripture. Finally, in Jesus Christ, we see the true image of God, unmarred by sin, and the promise that by His grace we also will be restored to the true image God in Christ. So the second question to ask when applying every passage should be, "What does this tell me about sinful humanity?"

## Barriers to Proper Application

---

*Failure to pray* – We must seek out God in prayer every time we engage His word. Our sin and prejudice leaves us prone to error, misunderstanding, and willful ignorance regarding what the Bible would teach us. Our prayer to God is that by His Spirit these barriers would be overcome and that we would be enlightened to see and acknowledge the truth, even when it is convicting or inconvenient.

*Failure to study the context (both Historical and Literary)* – It can sometimes be very tempting to jump from reading a passage to applying it, without taking the context into consideration. This is particularly true for certain parts of the New Testament. It may be true that certain passages will have a direct application for 21st-century Christians, but unless you study the context first, you can't be sure that you're not reading your own presuppositions back into the text.

*Failure to acknowledge your presuppositions* – No one reads the Bible in a vacuum. We all bring to the text a lifetime of experiences, beliefs, and assumptions. Additionally, each of our perspectives has been shaped by the various traditions with which we've been associated (whether Catholic, or Baptist, or Pentecostal, or Lutheran, or non-denominational, or Atheist, or Buddhist, etc). This is an unavoidable reality, and it's impossible for anyone to come to a text from a completely neutral perspective. This is true not only for the Bible, but for all communication. The good news is that we are able to communicate and impart information to one another, and we can expect the same to be true with the Bible. The important thing is to recognize what those presuppositions are and to be willing to challenge them as we read, understand, and apply the Bible.

## Applying the Bible – Part 2: How to Apply the Bible

---

There are many factors involved in applying the message of the Bible to your own life and community. It's not possible to treat all of the nuances of application in such a short space, but a broad outline and a few examples should create a framework which will allow you to pursue your own study and begin applying the Bible to your life. With time, you'll begin to see that the richness of biblical application extends well beyond what is presented below.

### Applying a Bible passage in 3 steps

---

1. *Determine what the passage means in its context* – As stated in Part 1, this is crucial for proper application. Study the passage, consult any necessary resources, and seek to understand what the passage meant to its original audience and how it applied to them. Attempt to place yourself within the historical and cultural situation. How would I have received this message? What would I have thought or done? If I were conversing with the author, what would I have asked, or how would I have answered? This understanding serves as a necessary control on interpretation to keep us from reading our own ideas into a text, and to keep us from applying a passage in ways that are not consistent with the inspired author's message.

2. *Extract the continuing truth from the passage* – What is the theological truth or underlying principle that drives the original application? What does this passage tell us about God? What does it tell us about humans? These truths may be right on the surface of the text, or they may be a little deeper, underneath a culturally specific command or a narrative account.

3. *Apply that truth to contemporary reality* – Your application may be general or specific or both. Look for situations today that parallel those of the original audience. Does this truth have any relevance to my life? Is there anything in my life and thought that is contrary to this truth? What changes would bring my life into conformity with this truth? Start a discussion with friends and family. They might see a relevant application that you haven't thought. Prayer and humility are especially important in this area, as we are vulnerable to being found in error or sin, as well as being required to do something uncomfortable. Our natural inclination will be to subconsciously (or consciously) refuse to acknowledge those things. Ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten and convict you to see and obey what you've learned.

### Example 1: Old Testament Law

---

If you build a new house, you must construct a guard rail around your roof to avoid being culpable in the event someone should fall from it. Deut 22:8 (NET)

Original Meaning – During this period, the roof was flat and regularly used as a living space, whether for socializing or as sleeping quarters (see 1 Sam 9:25; 2 Sam 11:2). The requirement for a guard rail (or "parapet") served to protect people on the roof from falling and being injured or killed.

Continuing Truth – Clearly, the intent of this law is to be concerned for your neighbor’s well-being. This can be considered an extension of the command to “Love your neighbor as yourself” (see Mk. 12:31; Gal 5:14). This command serves to curb our natural inclination to dismiss our part in another person’s well-being under the guise that they need to take responsibility for themselves (“am I my brother’s keeper?”). Specifically, this speaks of taking care to create a safe environment under your domain of responsibility to prevent an accident, even if it is a result of negligence on the part of the other person (such as falling off the side of a house).

Contemporary Application – While most homes don’t use the roof as a living space, any potentially unsafe condition in a home could be considered a parallel situation (stairs without banisters, exposed wiring, dead batteries in a smoke alarm, etc) and care should be taken to avoid them.

## Example 2: Teaching of Jesus

---

He also said to them, “You neatly reject the commandment of God in order to set up your tradition. For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever insults his father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say that if anyone tells his father or mother, ‘Whatever help you would have received from me is corban’ (that is, a gift for God), then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like this.” Mark 7:2 (NET)

Note: This passage provides an example of one of the additional factors involved in biblical application. When asking how the message would be received by the original audience it is possible to consider the passage above from the perspective of two audiences. The first would be the Pharisees as the original recipients of Jesus’ words, and the second would be the early Christians as the original recipients of the gospel of Mark. This might or might not have any effect on your interpretation/application, but it should be taken into consideration either way. This example will focus on the Pharisees as the recipients of Jesus’ words.

Original Meaning – The Pharisees noticed that the disciples do not perform ritual washings before eating their meals and inquire of Jesus why his disciples do not follow the traditions of the elders. These washings were not part of the OT law, but had developed into a religious custom over time. It’s possible that the tradition grew out of an application of the priestly washings (see Lev. 7:19-21; 22:3-9) to all of life, perhaps using the concept that all of Israel is a Kingdom of Priests (see Ex 19:6). Jesus accuses the Pharisees of being hypocrites, honoring God with religious customs while setting aside His commandments in the process. The specific example given is that of “Corban.” The Jews had a custom whereby one could make a financial pledge to the temple and would be absolved of obligations that they might have had with the money (such as caring for one’s parents). As a result, this religious tradition had taken precedence over God’s command to honor father and mother.

Continuing Truth – Religious practices, however pious and honorable they might be, can become a hindrance to true worship and obedience of God. It is possible to have an external appearance of devotion and holiness, while our hearts are far removed from a love for God and a desire to obey Him. This hypocrisy may not even be evident to us. The Pharisees truly believed they were being devoted and obedient, but Jesus points out that this is not really the case as they had managed to disregard a clear command of God in observance of religion. This is a continuing theme throughout the Bible (See 1 Sam 15:20-23; Prov 21:3; Isa 1:11-17; Mic 6:6-8; Matt 23:23, etc). God desires our hearts, and he desires for us to obey Him.

Contemporary Application – The danger of falling into the hypocrisy of the Pharisees is just as real today as it was then, particularly in the area of Christian ministry. Do we have an equivalent to Corban? Consider the stories that abound of missionaries and pastors who have dedicated their lives to work of ministry, but who have neglected their families in the process. If I offer my life on the altar of Christian service, does that absolve me from the biblical command to provide for my family (both physically and spiritually)? If I give 10% of my income to the local church, am I then free from any other responsibility to provide for the poor and needy? If I attend a church service and a weekly Bible study, am I living out the biblical mandate for Christians to be a community marked by love and care for one another? Do any of our religious practices, however pious and devotional they may be, leave us setting aside a clear command of God, either explicitly or in practice?

