

Does this apply to you?

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‘No application’

It’s a common refrain amongst those who listen to sermons. And one with some justification. I ‘joke’ with friends ‘it’s one thing to be able to predict the application when you know the passage, quite another to predict it before you do’. Such a joke is of course only possible because there is enough truth to it.

The task of the preacher is to teach godliness from Scripture (Titus 1:1). As Paul says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, correcting, rebuking and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16)”. Our sermons have plenty to say about Scripture, as they should, but many many of them have little to say about life and godliness. And if they do speak about life, it’s from a very small palate; go to church (although not so much right now), pray, read your Bible, give money, and tell people about Jesus. And it does seem to be many sermons. I know of someone who listened to hundreds of sermons as part of a pastoral search committee. Their judgement, which they documented, was that one sermon had application. I want to believe they were just really unlucky. But that seems a very brave position to take.

I hope though not just to moan but to graduate to at least ‘wounds of a friend’ (Psalm 145:1), and so to offer some reflection on why our preaching is so barren and how to improve it.

Some of it may be that we have collapsed the necessity of exegetical preaching with the sufficiency of exegetical preaching. Yes, we need to interact with Scripture as it is written, but we also need to hear what the whole scripture says about various aspects of reality. The theological colleges express this with curriculums that include subjects other than the exegetical study of particular books. Subjects like systematic and historical theology, biblical theology, church history, mission, philosophy and ethics. But for some reason this hasn’t transferred into our preaching. Where is the 12-week series on the Apostle’s creed? The 8-week series on marriage & family? The 5-week series on work? and so on. Yes, there is a danger when we preach on a topic that we will proof text, but we seem to have forgotten that when we preach on a text we might ‘proof apply’.

And even when we do preach exegetically, our passage breakdowns hobble us before we start. It seems to me that the chapter is very often the wrong unit to preach on. We should usually go much bigger and much smaller: preach on the whole book of Proverbs and then on a single proverb.

Overall I think both will be necessary. Sometimes this means speaking about a topic, and referencing a text, and sometimes about a text, referencing a topic. In the last year, three of the best talks I heard were a topical talk on friendship (springing from John 15:9-17), an exegetical talk on Luke 6:1-11 (with an extended reflection on rest) and a topical talk on children which referenced verses all over Scripture.

But even if we were to make these changes (more topical preaching, and different sized texts for exegetical preaching) there is a deeper reason why our applications might not improve.

We have, I think, misconstrued the nature of godly action. Most simply we tend to privilege the intention of the action over the action itself. The goodness of the action is determined by what's inside us, and not by the action that eventuates outside us. We are familiar with the secular version: if it feels right, it's good. But we haven't reckoned with the Christian version: if it's properly motivated it's good. Of course, the motivation tells part of the story of a godly action, but it does not tell the whole story. A good action will be more than the action itself, but it won't be less than the action.

We should note that Scripture affirms good actions with bad motives (e.g. Christ being preached with bad motives in Philippians 1:18), rejects bad actions that spring from good motives (the danger of 'zeal without knowledge', e.g. Proverbs 19:2), and rejects good intentions that don't lead to good actions ('faith without works is dead', James 2:17). In other words, actions matter.

No doubt we are influenced by the way the secular culture has progressed, but I think there have been two factors specific to our Christian culture which have influenced this shift. A fear of legalism, and the promotion of the best at the expense of the good.

Legalism, as we rejected it, construes the Christian life as arbitrary rules, at best rules which were necessary for godliness, and at worst rules which were necessary for salvation. We dismissed the second explicitly with 'good works will not save you', and first more subtly with 'it's what's on your heart that matters'.

And yes, it is true, good works will not save you. Arbitrary rules will not save you, neither will non-arbitrary rules, nor any other kind of action. We are saved by faith. However, good works, while not necessary for salvation, are necessary for godliness. And while a good work might sometimes include keeping an arbitrary rule, most of the time good works will take the form of other actions. We rejected two false ways of thinking about godly action (that it saves you, and that it consists of arbitrary rules) but didn't replace it with a proper alternative.

The second move we made was to say, 'the good is the enemy of the best'. By this we meant, that yes, there are many good things in life, but the best, the most important thing is that time is short and people need to hear about Jesus. We were, if you like, encouraged not to do good, but to do the best. It is an article itself to discuss this framing, but let me note quickly that 'best' or 'most important' are great ways to think about what needs to be done in the next two hours, a good way to summarize a long-term mission (say 'win the war'), but almost always terrible ways to think about ordering priorities over any other timeframe.

The result was our conversation narrowed. We preached, and talked, about fewer things. There are many good works, but only one salvation; there are many actions, but only one proper motivation; and there are many good things, but only one best thing.

We might have known about them, but we didn't talk about them. We didn't talk about marriage, about children, about how to suffer well, about work, about wealth, about politics, about blessing, about friendship, about longing, about patience, about exercise, about stories, about endurance, about games and so on. And if you don't talk about something for long enough, eventually you forget about it.

Take a virtue list. How many of these have we heard or given a talk on?

Or a vice list, how many of these have we heard or given a talk on (take 'lovers of pleasure will not inherit the kingdom of God' - I've always never wanted to hear a talk on this)?

Yes, there have been some good talks on some good things. Just not enough on enough.

It's like out Twitter feeds right now. In normal circumstances, a decent Twitter feed covers a multitude of topics. But now everything is about COVID-19. Well our Christian culture's Twitter feed has had one topic for a generation.

Things came to a head with the same-sex marriage debate. We faced a hostile secular culture, unsurprising, but it wasn't as though our Christian culture was all on the same page. I won't play out the specifics of the various camps, but I think a coherent position on such legislation requires at least, in addition to understanding the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ on our behalf, a view of the created order, of marriage and sexuality, of the relationship between the church and society, the role of government, the nature of legislation, the relationship between church and state, and a view on language. We were not equipped for such a conversation. One friend noted we weren't speaking the same language as the secular culture, true, but we weren't speaking our language either.

Same-sex marriage isn't the point. The point is, if we only speak about things when they're needed we'll only speak about things when it's too late.

Yes, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is central to our theology, and it's central to history. But it has implications for how we live all of life, and not just for how we, and others, become Christians in the first place.

Application is speaking from Scripture about life and godliness. And life and godliness requires lots of details. This lack of detail wouldn't matter if details didn't matter, or if they emanated automatically from a few general principals.

Consider the word 'love'. It is the summary description for how I am to relate to other people (and to God, for that matter), but while it gives me a disposition to others – I want to do what's best for them – it doesn't automatically turn into specific action. For example, I am called to love both my parents and my children. But one of these requires that I don't give instructions, the other requires that I do, at least until they are adults. Nothing in the word or concept 'love' tells me which is which – only the details of knowing how God has designed parents and children.

And getting the details right matters.

In 1 Timothy 4, Paul provides an example of false teachers who have got details wrong. These teachers ‘forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods’ (v3). It seems fair to assume that they got some other things wrong too, but Paul doesn’t draw attention to them here. Instead the things they get wrong seem almost prosaic; a detail about marriage (it shouldn’t be forbidden) and a detail about food (it also shouldn’t be forbidden). Any yet, this is equated with ‘things taught by demons’ (v1). The devil, it seems, is in the lack of detail.

These details, found in Scripture, don’t just appear as random items in a list. Rather they’re built into frameworks, and in turn, into a connected and comprehensive view of godly living. As the theologian Oliver O’Donovan says,

‘We will read the Bible seriously only when we use it to guide our thought towards a *comprehensive* moral viewpoint, and not merely to articulate disconnected moral claims, we must look to it not only for moral bricks, but for indications of the order in which the bricks belong together’¹

We are not just interested in the bricks, but the whole house. And in between the bricks and the house are walls.

So, for example, ‘Do not covet’ (paraphrase of Exodus 20:17). It is a command, with a boundary line, a ‘moral brick’, if you like. But as with all boundaries, it is not just a boundary telling me where I must not go, it is also a sign post to where I should go and why. So, to understand and apply ‘do not covet’ I will probably need a theology of possessions and gifts, and maybe also work and wealth. Perhaps something on thankfulness, contentment and generosity, maybe a discussion on when jealousy is appropriate, or how to respond to poverty and huge disparities in ownership, all the while with a reminder of repentance, and the forgiveness offered by Christ.

This is where specific topical talks may be most useful. Bricks can be learned in any context, but every now and then they must be put together into a wall. It’s the difference between a list of things to do in a city, and putting those things on a map. One points out some things to look for, the other helps you get around.

All this, needs to connect with to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ on our behalf, and with it, the wider Biblical narrative. The way we summarise the central narrative of Scripture will enhance or detract our ability to speak about godly living. So, for example, we may focus on how we are saved, at the expense of noticing what we are saved from (evil), or what we are saved for (good). We may truncate the message. I have heard often enough the phrase ‘you can’t understand grace if you don’t understand sin’. It’s true enough, but it misses the step before: we can’t understand sin if we don’t understand good. When we miss this step, we’ll tend to note how sin is wrong, but we’ll miss how sin is also bad for us, which in turn will lead us to think of godliness as arbitrary right things, rather than intrinsically good things.

¹ Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection & Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* 2nd Edition 1994 Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, p200

Perhaps a key point to remember for godly living is that, while post-resurrection we live in a new age, we still live in an old creation. We see this play out in Paul's discussion of singleness in 1 Corinthians 7. In light of the resurrection and the shortness of time, he commends something new, namely, remaining single. But notice the novelty he contemplates. The resurrection provides reasons why you might choose to remain single, but it does not actually change what being single, and being married are. Marriage (articulated directly in 1 Corinthians 7) remains an institution which includes sex, singleness (implied) remains one which does not. These categories were given in the old creation, and remain until the new creation.

Even with this though, a sermon has still not applied. Yes, from time to time, we may receive a direct personal command from God, but typically this is not the case. As O'Donovan notes,

‘though we may credibly claim to receive such commands from time to time, by far the greatest number of our concrete obligations are discerned by understanding how a generic demand applies to our circumstances’²

It is this discernment we need help with; to understand our circumstances, and in that context, suggestions for what godly action looks like.

Good preaching will anticipate the challenge I will face in applying Scripture. The human heart is an objection machine, manufacturing reasons not to do good. Inspired by the general human condition, compounded by the specific air my culture breathes and topped off with my own personal history, there will be a swarm of fears and delusions that keep me from doing good. And even when I know what's good, untackled, these fears and delusions will see me snap back after a week or two of white-knuckled reluctant obedience. Good preaching helps me not just apprehend what is good, but appreciate it as well. It names my fear, anticipates why I won't want to obey and navigates between false alternatives. It demonstrates that it has understood the world I live in, and both the real and imagined challenges I face in trusting Jesus with joy.

Good preaching will understand my circumstances. To pick up the earlier example of coveting, it will not be enough to say, 'don't be materialist' or 'don't be consumerist' (if I had a dollar for every time I'd been told not to be materialist). These are too abstract. We live in a material world. I need to eat, I must live somewhere. If a preacher wants me even to listen, let alone change, they will need to do more. They'll need to acknowledge we need to consume, that possessions are a good gift from God, that we live in an expensive city, that this makes for complicated trade-offs and so on. Of course, not every circumstance can be articulated in every sermon, that would be death by a thousand qualifications, but some circumstances. Then, they might be able to challenge me on how I feel about my possessions and experiences, on whether I am thankful or envious for what God has given others, and then regarding my own wealth on whether I'm using it for relationships or just for myself, on whether the only things I sacrifice for are work and my family or whether I also sacrifice for the name and people of Jesus.

² Oliver O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking: Ethics as Theology Volume 2* 2014 Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, p30

And good preaching will make concrete suggestions: perhaps I should get off Facebook, or move to cheaper city, or learn to budget, or talk to someone who coveted someone else's wife, and ask them how that went, or intentionally note some things to be thankful for each day. It's not so much that a specific action is required to apply a particular piece of Scripture, but some action will be.

The suggestions may even be contradictory. In one month, I remember noticing one father who left for work really early so he could in turn leave work early and be back for dinner. But I recommended to another father that he try and get to work a little later, to be there for breakfast and school drop off, but stay later and miss dinner - his work, editing, didn't start until after others had done their work, and continued until, well, it was finished. Both were implications of the same reality; it's good to eat meals with family, and properly being at one and missing one, is better than half being at two, or not being there at all.

A sermon could cover both options and more in a paragraph or two, and without the risk of being legalist, without ignoring motivation, and without detracting from the importance of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yes, a one on one conversation is the best context to be direct and specific. But a sermon can provide suggestions that help me imagine the types of actions I can take.

The task seems big, but I've often found pastors have well thought out policies on any number of issues, it just doesn't often make the talks. In one sense a good sermon will just walk us through how a piece of Scripture has affected their lives, with a little imagination for how it would be different if their circumstances were different.

All this cannot be taught in a day, which is my point. It's not about doing a talk on a topic once, it's about many many talks (and other forms of communication) filling out our understanding of the world God has made, his plans for it, and how we follow Jesus.

No one is expecting sermons will do all the work. There are books, podcasts, articles, discussions and the like. But good sermons provide the permission and language for all the other conversations, as well as an indication of what is worth talking about. They are a gift that gives twice, in the moment, as we are exhorted to respond to some truth in Scripture, and later, in the rest of life, with the conversations they promote and enable.

But there is a dark side to this. Unapplied preaching robs twice; in the moment, and in the all the conversations that don't happen. It is not a good silence.

Jesus Christ gave himself for us to redeem for himself a people who are 'eager to do good' (Titus 2:14). The challenge for us is to help prepare each other to do good, without forgetting how we are redeemed, or who we belong to, without resorting to arbitrary rules, while also caring about whether we are eager. The bar, if you like, is not that we resentfully or reluctantly do good, but rather joyfully and eagerly.

We need help doing this. If you'd like the job, please apply.