

Application of Christ to Our Lives

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There is a saying 'you are what you eat'. And in a sense this is literally true. To varying degrees what we physically put into our body as food will become part of us. Our body will transform, or at least attempt to transform what we eat into things that will sustain it. And the same could be said about the phrase - feed your mind or brain.

In a lesson from two weeks ago on John chapter 6 I included a short portion from Matthew Henry's commentary on that chapter. There when Mr. Henry was specifically commenting on - **'What is meant by eating this flesh and drinking this blood'** spoken of in John 6:54 he brought up 4 points for consideration. Here are those 4 points again -

1. Having an Appetite for Christ
2. Application of Christ to our lives
3. A delight in Christ and his salvation
4. To *feed upon Christ* is to do all *in his name*

In today's lesson our focus will be on the 2nd of these 4 items. The application of Christ to our lives.

The Oxford dictionary defines the word 'application' as follows -

1. a formal request to an authority for something.
2. the action of putting something into operation.

I believe Mr Henry had the 2nd of these two ideas in mind when he wrote the following concerning the application of Christ to our lives. Here are his words again -

'An application of Christ to ourselves. Meat looked upon will not nourish us, but meat fed upon, and so made our own, and as it were one with us. We must so accept of Christ as to appropriate him to ourselves: my Lord, and my God, (John 20:28).

The scripture reference used here Mr Henry John 20:28 is of a scene when Jesus appears to his disciples after His resurrection. John 20:24-29 *"Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" **Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."***

Now here we are nearly some 2,000 years later and I think it safe to say we, those gathered here this morning, are among those who have not seen Jesus literally being crucified and raised. But as Paul states in his letter to the Galatian churches - Galatians 3:1-6 -

*“You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? **Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.** I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? Have you experienced so much in vain—if it really was in vain? So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard? So also Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”*

Scholars may disagree on exactly when they believe this letter to the Galatian churches was written. But all agree it was clearly more that a decade after Christ had been crucified. And Paul’s statement that Christ had been clearly portrayed as crucified to them tells us that Paul’s letter was intended to be read by people who did not actually see Christ on that cross literally. Notwithstanding that it is possible that someone hearing Paul’s message back then actually did see Christ being crucified. For both Paul’s letter and Christ’s crucifixion both came within the time span of a single human life.

The word translated ‘portrayed’ in the NIV is the Greek word *prographō* pronounced (prog-raf’-o) - meaning to write previously; figuratively to announce, prescribe. Thus Paul is speaking about having clearly portrayed Christ crucified to them in his earlier writings or speeches and through Scripture written in the past.

I labor this point here because Scripture written centuries before Paul’s day clearly portrays details about the coming Messiah, including details of the suffering He would endure. The true meaning behind many of those passages has become much clearer to us living on this side of the cross of Christ. That is after it actually happened. The Scriptures give us an account of God’s love for mankind and just how far God was willing to go to demonstrate that love.

Years ago when I first started coming to church and learning about Christ I was under the impression that one major goal of becoming a Christian was to improve one’s life. As I understood it that would involve doing some things differently in my life. I would need to stop doing some things and starting doing some others. My question was - what exactly were those things? Simply put what does God want from me? Like many I could see that there were things in my life on which I could improve. But on the other hand I thought - there are other things that I am pretty well at that probably don’t necessarily need improving on. And I held this belief for quite some time.

Then I began to find there was no shortage of passages in scripture which I could not understand. Like the following one in Luke.

Luke 14:26 - *“If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my*

disciple.” I thought If God is Love then why am I to hate all those people listed in this passage? Particularly when other passages said things like *“Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.”* (Exodus 20:12). Then I found out that this particular passage from Exodus was in the Old Testament and those to whom it was written were under another covenant. So maybe that didn’t apply to me I thought. But that still left me with the idea that if I wanted to become a Christian and follow Jesus I had to start hating my father, mother, wife etc. BUT - then I read - *“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”*

Did Christ love the church by hating it? Did Jesus go to the cross for something He hated. Well I could understand Christ hating sin, and we humans are certainly sinners according to scripture. For all have sinned...

My conundrum became - How can I apply this to my life? Adding to all this I am also to hate my own life??? How does one apply that to their life and hope to end up with something good to come out of it?

As I wrestled with trying to understand various scriptures I found myself becoming confused as to just what God wanted from us humans.

Which leads me to the title of today’s lesson taken from Matthew Henry’s commentary on John chapter 6 where he speaks of - application of Christ to our lives. As stated earlier Matthew Henry provides a very practical and easy to understand lesson using meat as the example. He stated that by simply looking at the meat you will not get filled up and reap the benefits of it. You have to eat it to reap those benefits. And thus in John chapter 6 Jesus stated - *“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”*

Thus God’s Word is not something we look at and try to observe. It is what we are to be transformed by. It is that which produces and maintains life in us! The universe and everything in it were created through God’s Word, and everything is maintained by His Word we are told. And John’s gospel account says that Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Simply put we are part of this universe and are therefore being maintained (living) because of God’s Word. Therefore the idea of ‘adding’ God’s Word to our lives is ridiculous to say the least. We might as well say I don’t need air to breathe and live, I just find it is helpful to have for doing things I want to do throughout my day.

In Matthew 4:4 we see Jesus making this statement - *“It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”*. Jesus here is repeating what was stated in Deuteronomy 8:3. The Word of God is more essential to us than the very bread we eat to sustain our physical bodies.

Paul says it this way - *“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”* (Galatians 2:20-21)

It is not about applying Christians principles or practicing Christian doctrine for the purpose of improving ourselves, but rather of being transformed by God through His Word into something completely different from the fallen sinners that we have become by our own doing.

As Matthew Henry pointed out - the application of Christ to our lives is essential to life itself. And it is nothing short of that. Like food for the body which does nothing for us by simply looking at it, so is the Word of God. We must consume it. The application of Christ to our lives is more than just adding Christ to our lives.

I read an article recently which discussed this idea of simply adding Christ to our already existing lives. The author points out 3 mistakes in doing so. Here is that article for our consideration -

A few years ago, I was preparing for a small group Bible study on Luke 14:26 according to my church’s recommended steps. The Bible study steps culminated with “application” (i.e., “How can you apply this to your life?”), which is common in contemporary Bible studies. Yet I struggled to understand how to “apply to my life” Jesus’s call to “hate . . . [your] own life.”

As I wrestled with the text, I began to see the limitations of the practice of “application” (at least, as it was presented to me). Throughout Scripture, the Lord calls us to more than minor tweaks and slight adjustments to our already stable lives. Instead, Jesus’ call in Luke 14 (and in all of Scripture) is much deeper, wider, and even more practical than the language of “application” captures.

3 Common, Faulty Assumptions

Again, my concern isn’t about the importance of “practicing Christian doctrine” (to borrow Beth Felker Jones’s helpful phrase). Indeed, the gospel of Jesus Christ changes every aspect of our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit, and Scripture helps us see the many outworkings of that.

My main concern with the language of “application” is that it can carry faulty—and harmful—assumptions about how we approach Scripture. Here are three.

Assumption #1: I should start with me and my questions.

The task of application implies using an external object to support a person and his or her purposes (e.g., applying sunscreen or a productivity technique). “Applying Scripture” can therefore assume a prioritization of me and my life as the starting point—from which I can utilize the external object of a biblical truth. We often begin with our own perception of the world and then read the Bible to discover “what it means to me,” looking to address our lives, our questions, and our problems.

The danger is this assumption makes me the center of the interpretive solar system, with everything revolving around me and my life. The more a truth “applies” to my life, the more gravity it has. Anything that seems inapplicable to me gets dismissed and is relegated to the status of space debris.

Proposed alternative: Start with God.

Rather than allowing our questions and assumptions to have the first say, so that we “eclipse the biblical narrative,” we can begin with God’s story and the reality of the world as he established it. We start reading Scripture with God as the fundamental reality, just as the Bible begins to tell the story: “In the beginning, God” (Gen. 1:1).

This doesn’t mean we can’t bring our questions or present our problems to God as we read Scripture (e.g. turning to particular Psalms in seasons of pain, fear, or grief; or reading Proverbs in family devotions to cultivate habits of wisdom). But it does mean we “seek first the kingdom” and consider our questions and problems within that orientation. We should avoid what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls the “unbiblical” search for a solution from the “vantage point” of humanity.

It’s likely many of our questions will be addressed when we locate ourselves within God’s story, the true story. Yet it’s also possible the Lord’s response to us—like his responses to Job and Peter (Job 38–41; John 21:22)—isn’t a direct answer to our questions or an immediate solution to our problems but rather an even greater solution: his presence.

Assumption #2: The Bible is (primarily) a collection of principles.

Shallow approaches to application make assumptions about the object of our search. We turn the Bible into an answer key, a collection of principles, or “eternal truths” waiting to be “discovered” and “applied.” We read biblical stories, poetry, prophecy, epistles, and apocalyptic literature and ask, “What nugget can I take away from this?” Sometimes it seems Scripture would be better suited to us if it were in the form of an Excel spreadsheet—a series

of lists of statements, rules, principles for life, and facts of the world ready to be applied to any given situation with a quick Control+F.

Like the rich young ruler who came to Jesus looking for some sage insight he might use in his already decent life (Mark 10:17-22), we come to the text of Scripture looking for a principle we might apply to our lives, our jobs, and our cars' bumpers. Yet in doing so, we too may miss out on the life-engulfing invitation of God in Scripture.

Proposed alternative: Scripture is (fundamentally) the story of God and his work.

My attempts to use Scripture primarily as a collection of principles can dull its living and active power (Heb. 4:12). Are there principles in Scripture? Certainly. But it's fundamentally an account of who God is and what he has done to redeem creation from the deleterious effects of sin.

Scripture is, as has become popular to say, a "story" or "drama" of God. Rather than picking out principles from the story (leaving the story behind once we've derived the principle, like it's the kernel in a husk), the nature of this story inclines us (with all of ourselves) to be engrossed by it and to encounter its Author.

Assumption #3: The goal of reading the Bible is improving my life.

With this assumption, the application of Scripture ends up being more like a divine stamp of approval on pursuing my own goals for my own benefit. This reflex has led to an onslaught of (both good and bad) books and sermons on the "biblical way" to do X (whether X is to make money, vote, dress, raise kids, do business, or even diet). Having been trained in these "application habits," I open my Bible and look for immediate personal benefits from the words of Scripture—such as three takeaways or one minor behavioral change I can make on the spot.

It's unsurprising we find it difficult to appreciate the aspects of Scripture that seem to defy immediate application—the Old Testament's peculiar stories, Israel's ceremonial customs, and the early church's apocalyptic expectations. These need not be shunned by the church because of their seemingly limited applicability but rather embraced as parts of God's story and God's work to redeem creation.

Imagine asking a friend how her day was and two minutes into her summary interjecting, "Wait, tell me how this applies to me?" We'd never do this. And yet we do it to God. We

exchange the feast of relational intimacy and holistic formation for the porridge of minor behavioral change and practical nuggets for our optimized life.

Proposed alternative: The goal of reading the Bible is communing with God.

When we start from our problems and perspectives, looking for principles to improve our lives, we often miss God's invitation in Scripture to know and commune with him. God reveals himself in Scripture not primarily to make some aspect of our lives better on our terms but to bring us to himself—to reveal his love for us and his desire to be with us.

This is where we find true “improvement”—the abundant life in Jesus (John 10:10). Yet we don't come to the abundant life by gradual life hacks toward our own goals on our own terms. We die to ourselves and find our lives in Christ (Gal. 2:20), orienting all aspects of ourselves toward God himself and communion with him.

Reorienting Our Reading

I've grown to love Scripture (and the God of Scripture) more as I upend the three faulty assumptions listed above. As we reorient our Bible reading, we begin to see the activity more like reading a good autobiography—where we get to know and love the author—than an instruction manual. Reading Scripture shouldn't lead to changing one aspect of our character or giving up some small amount of time; it should remind us that Jesus is calling us to give up everything (Phil 3:8-10), even our own lives (Luke 14:26), so that he might change all of us (1 Thess. 5:23).

As Dorothy Sayers says, “Surely it is not the business of the Church to adapt Christ to men, but to adapt men to Christ.” So, if we must choose between “applying the Bible to our lives” and “applying our lives to the story of God,” Sayers asks us to consider the latter—to orient ourselves toward God, his true story of the whole world, and communion with him.

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The first step of “Application of Christ to our lives” is realizing who Jesus is, as did Thomas when he finally saw Jesus as the risen Christ and declared - “*My Lord and my God!*”