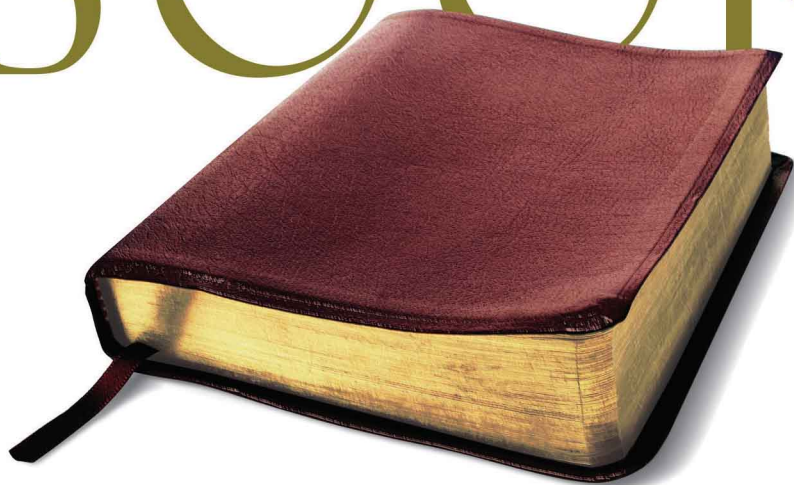


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THE ART AND SCIENCE OF READING THE BIBLE

*Revised and Updated*

FOREWORD BY CHARLES R. SWINDOLL

# THE CRITICAL STEP OF APPLICATION

**A** reporter was interviewing renowned psychiatrist Karl Menninger at the famous Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas. When the conversation turned to the subject of prison reform, the doctor handed his listener a book he had written on the subject. The reporter politely promised to read it.

“No you won’t,” Dr. Menninger shot back in his acerbic manner. “Besides, what would you do about it if you did? Put the book down and go on to something else?”

That’s exactly the situation confronting people when it comes to Bible study. They promise to pick up the Word, but it usually amounts to very little. The real question is this: Even if they did read and study God’s Word faithfully, what would they do about it? What practical difference would they let it make in their lives?

This is a question you need to ponder as we come to the third step in Bible study, Application. Application is the most neglected yet the most needed stage in the process. Too much Bible study begins and ends in the wrong place: It begins with Interpretation, and it also ends there. But we’ve learned that you don’t start with the question, What does this mean? but rather, What

does this say? Furthermore, you don't end the process by asking, What does this mean? but rather, How does this work? Again, not *does* it work—but *how*?

Understanding, then, is simply a means to a larger end—practicing biblical truth in day-to-day life. Observation plus interpretation without application equals abortion. That is, every time you observe and interpret but fail to apply, you perform an abortion on the Scriptures in terms of their purpose. The Bible was not written to satisfy your curiosity; it was written to transform your life. The ultimate goal of Bible study, then, is not to do something to the Bible, but to allow the Bible to do something to you, so truth becomes tangent to life.

You see, we frequently come to the Bible to study it, to teach it, to preach it, to outline it—everything except to be changed by it.

### **MAKE THE TRUTH ATTRACTIVE**

Titus 1:1 provides a clear statement of the purpose of Scripture: Paul describes it as “the truth that leads to godliness” (NIV). Then in chapter 2 he gives a specific case in point.

Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, *so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.* (v. 9–10 NIV, italics added)

One translation puts it, “that they may adorn the teachings”—that they would put on those teachings like a set of clothes. Biblical truth is the wardrobe of the soul. It's much more exclusive than anything you can buy from Nordstrom, it's always in style, it's thoroughly coordinated, and it's perennially attractive.

Attractive truth is applied truth. A man once told me, “You know, Brother Hendricks, I've been through the Bible twelve times.” That's wonderful. But how many times has the Bible been through him?

You see, there's an inherent danger in Bible study: it can degenerate into a process that's intellectually fascinating but spiritually frustrating. You can get mentally excited by the truth, yet fail to be morally changed by it. If and

when that happens, you know there must be something wrong with your study of the Bible.

Our task, then, is two-sided. First, we must get into the Word of God for ourselves. But then we must allow that Word to get into us, to make a permanent difference in our character and conduct.

In this final section of the book, I want to probe into this third area of Bible study. It's very convicting. Fasten your safety belt, because there's liable to be some turbulence ahead. I want this material to provoke your thinking—not paralyze it.

### **FIVE SUBSTITUTES FOR APPLICATION**

What happens when you fail to apply Scripture? Let me suggest five substitutes for application, five routes which, unfortunately, many Christians take in their study of the Word. Every one of them is a dead-end street.

#### **We substitute interpretation for application**

How easy it is to settle for knowledge rather than experience. If you've sat through enough sermons, you've probably heard the bromide, "May the Lord bless this truth to your heart." As one who makes his living teaching people how to preach, I've discovered that this frequently means, "I don't have a clue as to how this passage works in your life."

That's an outrage because according to the Bible, to know and not to do is not to know at all.

Do you remember the tragic story of Kitty Genovese? She was a young lady who was brutally attacked, beaten, raped, and ultimately killed in a fashionable New York City neighborhood. In the aftermath of the crime, reporters interviewed countless neighbors to find out if anyone had any clues. Incredibly, they learned that thirty-eight people had heard Kitty's screams. In fact, several of them had witnessed the attack. But none of them came to her rescue. Only one called the police, and that only after the third and fatal attack.

Kitty Genovese's murder was a watershed in American culture, an event on which sociologists have often reflected: How could we develop a society in which a human being could be attacked so viciously and repeatedly, with the

public's knowledge, and yet no one would respond with help? That's the tragedy of knowledge that does not create responsibility.

Lack of involvement is not the perspective of the Scriptures. From cover to cover the Bible teaches that the moment you know God's truth, the ball is in your court; you are responsible for putting it into action. That's why Jesus so often said that to whom much has been given, much will be required (Matthew 13:12; Luke 12:48). Or, to His disciples, "Why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46). Implication: either stop calling me "Lord," or start doing what I tell you.

On another occasion, Jesus said, "Many will say to Me in that day [referring to the final judgment], 'Lord, Lord, [note the accurate terminology] have we not done many wonderful things in your name?'" (Matthew 7:22). Jesus never denied that they had. But He rejects them nonetheless: "I never knew you, depart from me."

What does that mean? He never knew them cognitively? No, that would be heresy. Jesus Christ is omniscient; He knew everything that was going on. But He was talking about relational knowledge: "I never knew you in terms of a personal relationship."

The classic illustration of interpretation without application is the scribes and Pharisees. These religionists had all of the data. They had mastered the Old Testament, but they were never mastered by the truth. Did they know where the Messiah was to be born? Absolutely! They were authorities on that: Bethlehem of Judea, of course. But when the report came, did they go down to check it out? No, even though the town was only five miles down the road.

Unfortunately, their knowledge created no responsibility within them. No wonder Jesus said in Matthew 5:20, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom." Why not? Because all of their righteousness was external. It was based on facts. It never led to a personal response.

I think the danger is well-expressed in James 4:17: "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins" (NIV). How does that grab you? The person who knows the truth but doesn't act on it is not simply making a mistake—making a poor judgment—he is in sin. In God's mind, knowledge without obedience is sin.

### **We substitute superficial obedience for substantive life-change**

This is even more common than the problem we just looked at. Can you identify with it? Here, we apply biblical truth to areas where we're already applying it, not to new areas where we're not applying it. Result: no noticeable change in our lives.

For example, say a man in the business world comes across Ephesians 4:25, which deals with the issue of honesty: "Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth, each one of you, with his neighbor, for we are members of one another."

Pretty clear, isn't it? So what does he do? He thinks of all the areas where he's already honest. For instance, he's honest with his wife; he wouldn't think of lying to her. Likewise, he shoots straight with his children; they can always count on Dad to give them the true story. He's honest with his associates at work; people trust him. When he reads Ephesians 4:25, he thinks of all of these areas in which he is already obeying that truth, and pats himself on the back. "Am I speaking the truth with other people?" he asks himself. "You bet."

But meanwhile he overlooks the fact that he's only partially honest with his competitors. He never even thinks of that area. It remains a blind spot for him, with the result that the truth never affects that part of his life.

What would happen if he ever did evaluate his honesty in that regard? He would likely take the third route . . .

### **We substitute rationalization for repentance**

Most of us have a built-in early-warning system against spiritual change. The moment truth gets too close, too convicting, an alarm goes off, and we start to defend ourselves. Our favorite strategy is to rationalize sin instead of repenting of it.

How would this work for the businessman struggling with the issue of honesty? Well, he rationalizes his lack of integrity. He can't avoid the reality that he lies to get ahead, so he says, "OK, I admit it. I fudge here and there with my competitors. But you've got to understand. They're all non-Christians. They all lie. I mean, you can't expect me to be lily-white when I have to compete against a group like that. I have to work in the real world. I think you should be as honest as you can, but face it—that's just the way the game is

played.” The bottom line is, he doesn’t change. Worst of all, he feels completely comfortable about it.

How do I know? Because one time a man had me to his house for dinner and boasted—in the presence of his children, unfortunately—with how he had ripped off the government for \$500 on his taxes. Of course, he didn’t get the response from me that he expected. So he pulled out an article he had clipped from the paper on how the government had lost \$5 million on some fiasco in Oklahoma.

“Imagine that, \$5 million!” he said. “When the government stops wasting money like that, I’ll start paying my extra \$500.”

But that still didn’t persuade me. So he changed his approach. “I gave all the money to missions,” he said rather piously.

I thought, *I’m sure God must be impressed.*

That’s what I call a finely woven system of rationalization.

The older you get, the more experienced you become at doing this. You build up a reservoir of responses so that whenever the truth gets too convicting, you’ve got sixteen reasons why it applies to everyone but you.

### **We substitute an emotional experience for a volitional decision**

That is to say, we study the Word of God, we emote under impact—but we make no real change. There’s nothing wrong with responding emotionally to spiritual truth. In fact, believers could stand a lot more of it today. But if that’s our only response—if all we do is water our handkerchiefs and sob a few mournful prayers, then go merrily on our way without altering our behavior in the slightest—then our spirituality boils down to nothing more than a vapid emotional experience.

When I speak in a church, I often have to endure what I call the “glorification of the worm” ceremony. That’s what takes place at the door of the church after the service. The people come by and shake my hand and say, “Oh, Brother Hendricks, that was a wonderful sermon. It was like listening to Paul.” I’ve had people come by with tears rolling down their cheeks, saying, “Man, you really got to me today. [sniffle]. I really appreciated that. Thanks a lot.” They’re really broken up. Yet what do they do? Go home to watch a ball game. There’s no change.

They've had an emotional response to a sermon. But will they ever have a volitional response to God's truth? Will they ever make substantive, fundamental, life-changing decisions based on what the Scriptures say?

Fortunately, every now and then I run into a rare phenomenon—genuine change in response to biblical truth. When that happens, I never forget it.

I was preaching once on the importance of evangelism in one's sphere of influence—developing relationships, cultivating friendships, winning a hearing. Afterward, when I got to the back, I heard all of the usual polite palaver. But finally a young couple came by, and I knew they were for real. They shook my hand warmly and said, "Thanks. Thanks very much. We will never be the same again. Thanks for being the instrument that the Holy Spirit used."

They went home, got lunch for their kids, put them down for a nap, came into their living room, opened up their Bibles to the passage I had expounded that morning, read it over, thought it through in terms of its implications for their lives, got down on their knees, and began to pray, "Lord, give us a burden for our neighbors."

When they got up from their knees, they looked out the front window. They saw their neighbor mowing his lawn, going back and forth, back and forth. The man looked at his wife and said, "Are you getting the same message I am?"

"Yes," she said, "we really need to get to know those people."

So the fellow went over and engaged his neighbor in conversation. Finally he suggested, "Hey, how about coming over to the house for a steak fry this week? Wednesday all right?"

"Sure," the surprised neighbor said. "I'd love to do that."

And that's what they did. In fact, that launched a process that has continued to this day: a steady stream of men, women, and young people have come to Christ through the relationships and impact of that couple. They were not satisfied with just being exposed to the truth of God or convicted by it; they were *changed* by it. They made a volitional decision in response to what they heard God saying. And that's where real change always begins—in the will.

### **We substitute communication for transformation**

We talk the talk, but we don't walk the walk. We think that if we can speak eloquently or convincingly about a point of Scripture, we're covered. We're off



the hook. We've caused others to believe that we've got that biblical truth down. But God is not fooled. He knows our hearts. Moreover, He knows our true behavior. That's why He told Samuel, "God sees not as man sees, for man looks at [and listens to] the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at [and listens to] the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). Likewise, the writer to the Hebrews says that "nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:13 NIV).

King David learned that truth the hard way. Recall that he violated Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, then when she became pregnant with his child, he arranged to have Uriah killed in battle. Afterwards, he covered up his sins and carried on as if nothing had happened.

Then one day the prophet Nathan paid David a visit. Remember that in Old Testament times, prophets spoke for God. So in effect, Nathan represented the Word of God. What was God's word to David? Nathan told a story about a rich, powerful man having stolen a poor man's only possession—his one lamb—in order to feed a guest. Upon hearing of this injustice, David burst into righteous indignation: "As the Lord lives [don't you just love how David invokes the Lord's name, as if to bolster his personal piety?], surely the man who has done this deserves to die. And he must make restitution for the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and had no compassion" (2 Samuel 12:5–6).

Imagine if you'd been standing there, listening to David make that speech. You'd probably have thought, "Wow, David is really standing up for the poor man. He's championing righteousness. What a fantastic leader. No wonder God calls him a man after His own heart." Without question, David's words were very compelling.

But God is never as impressed with our words as other people may be. "The Lord looks at the heart." "Nothing . . . is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare." That's why Nathan looked David in the eye and cut him to the quick by declaring, "You are the man!" (v. 7).

The Word of God will do that to you—if you let it. It will cut you to the quick. The section of Hebrews just cited likens the Word to a razor-sharp sword that can pierce deep inside of us, where "it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12 NIV). That's the level at which transfor-

mation takes place. But transformation will never take place if we evade the convicting stab of Scripture by hiding behind our speech.

### A LOOK IN THE MIRROR

The apostle James asks a penetrating question in the first chapter of his book: Does the Word work? Answer: Yes, it does, if it is *received* (v. 21). He uses an interesting word. It basically means to put out a welcome mat. Do you welcome the truth into your life? Do you invite it in the door and let it do its work on you?

You see, when we leave church on Sunday morning, the issue is not what did the preacher say, but rather what are we going to do as a result of what he said? But often we hear a sermon or go to a Bible study and hear a tremendous lesson that is very convicting—yet what do we do? We walk away from it and say, “When’s the next Bible study?”

James says, “Look, you’ve got to embrace biblical truth.” And he offers an interesting illustration to make his point—the analogy of the mirror (vv. 23–25). Most of us spend considerable time in front of a mirror every day, making the most of whatever we’ve got to work with. James talks about a person who does just the opposite.

“Good night,” a guy says, looking at himself in the mirror. “I need to wash my face. I need to shave. I need to comb my hair.” But after noticing all of that, he walks off and does nothing.

Imagine that he goes down to the office, and pretty soon his boss walks in, takes one look him, and says, “Hey, what’s up with you? You out of razors?”

“No,” the fellow replies. “In fact I just bought a fresh pack of them yesterday.”

“Well, you’d better do something with them,” the manager warns, “or you won’t be long in the employ of this company.”

That’s the situation James is describing. Every time you study the Word of God but are not changed by it, it’s as if you look in a mirror and see that you’re a mess, yet you walk away and do nothing.

There’s an alternative: “But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does” (v. 25).

All of us want the blessing of God. But are we responding to the revelation of God? Turn with me to the next chapter, and we'll look at how God's truth transforms our lives.

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