

Application

Introduction

- a. A basic thesis: good application is about good listening
- b. An encouragement: if you want to apply the Bible, you've started well
- c. A caution: it is possible not to listen carefully enough
 - Not all inadequate interpretation comes from not taking the Bible seriously...
 - ... in fact, most of the false teachers in the New Testament had a Bible in their hands

"You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life... Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?" John 5:39-47

"Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works... For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven...?'" Romans 10:2-6

- In both cases, the issue is that they haven't listened carefully enough
 - Not hearing the essential message
 - Not listening to the end

- d. ... Especially when you want to use the Bible

"This is *my* Bible. I am what it says I am. I can do what it says I can do. Today, I will be taught the Word of God. I boldly confess: My mind is alert, my heart is receptive. I will never be the same. I am about to receive the incorruptible, indestructible, ever-living seed of the Word of God. I will never be the same. Never, never, never. I will never be the same. In Jesus name. Amen."

So how do you listen well?

1. Listening well means listening to what the words are *doing*

a. A collection of facts?

The Bible a collection of things we ought to believe...

God is good

Jesus is Lord

Prayer works

Divorce is bad

Jesus is coming back

We have the Spirit

... and the application left to us

b. Words that do things

i. Words in general: "Coffee would keep me awake"¹

Discussion: Take the sentence "Coffee would keep me awake." How many different things can you think of that I might be doing with those words (for example, I might be giving an answer in a game where I had to think of as many things as possible that would keep me awake in 30 seconds)?

Some options:

Some observations:

1. You haven't understood "coffee would keep me awake" until you've understood what I was trying to *do* with those words
2. Once you've understood what I'm trying to *do* with those words, you don't really need to think of an application: the application is implicit in what I'm doing with the words
3. The key to understanding what I'm trying to do is to put the words into a full enough context

Full verbal context

Context of the communication between speaker and listener

¹ This example is taken from Kevin Vanhoozer, *First Theology*.

c. Bible words do things too

i. The kind of book the Bible is: pastoral theology

ii. Our earlier examples

Romans 10: what was the Law trying to do?

John 5: what was Moses doing?

iii. And the key to hearing what the Bible is doing is putting the words into a full enough context

The context of the relationship between speaker and hearer

Why authors and their readers matter: our way in to what these words are *doing* is to ask, "What was the Bible author doing when he wrote these words to the people he was seeking to pastor?"

The context of the argument

iv. A worked example

"Are [angels] not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?" Hebrews 1:14

What's wrong with this paragraph?

"In Hebrews 1:14 we discover that the angels of heaven are ministering spirits who have been sent out to serve us. Just think of that! It's an incredible thought. Angels were sent for us. Angels serve us. One of the things that I've noticed is that Christians barely ever talk about angels. We should talk about them more. We should look out for angels. We should pray that we might see angels. We should listen to the angels when we have opportunity. As one famous thinker put it, 'I believe in angels: something good in everything I see.' And as another replied, 'I'm loving angels instead.'"

One way of skinning the cat: context

Context 1: The comparison between the Son and the angels (1:5-14)

Context 2: The finality of the messages (covenants) mediated by the Son and angels (2:1-4)

Context 3: Listen more closely to the Son! (2:1-4)

Context 4: Don't fall away! (e.g. 3:12 – but also chapter 6, 10, 12)

Another way of skinning the cat: what the author is doing with these words

Groupwork:

*Think about this paragraph from Richard Dawkins. How might what we've seen about good listening and paying attention to what the author is **doing** have helped him to make more sense of Judges? It might just be worth saying that it's not a very nice paragraph and at some universities you'd get a trigger warning for sexual assault here.*

"The story of Lot and the Sodomites is eerily echoed in chapter 19 of the book of Judges, where an unnamed Levite (priest) was travelling with his concubine in Gibeah. They spent the night in the house of a hospitable old man. While they were eating their supper the men of the city came and beat on the door, demanding that the old man should hand over his male guest 'so that they may know him.' In almost exactly the same words as Lot, the old man said: 'Nay, my brethren, nay, I pray you, do not so wickedly; seeing that this man is come into mine house do not this folly. Behold, here is my daughter a maiden, and his concubine; them I will bring out now, and humble ye them, and do with them what seemeth good unto you; but unto this man do not so vile a thing (Judges 19:23-4).'" Again, the misogynistic ethos comes through, loud and clear. I find the phrase 'humble ye them' particularly chilling. Enjoy yourselves by humbling and raping my daughter and this priest's concubine, but show a proper respect for my guest who is, after all, male..."²

Is Judges doing the same thing Richard Dawkins thinks it is? How do you know? If you're not familiar with Judges and you're looking for context, 18:1, 19:1 and 21:25 might be a helpful place to start. 2:6-3:6 gives even more context if you need it.

An observation: the way we apply the Old Testament is sometimes alarming similar to what Richard Dawkins is doing here...

- v. Some basic principles for listening to what the Bible is **doing**
 - Take heart: God's word is effective...
 - ... so most importantly, read, read, read
 - And pray

But is there any more to say?

- Context
- Where the author tells you...

² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006), 240-1. Try to ignore his deliberately manipulative decision to quote the Authorized Version in his endeavour to make the Scriptures seem a moral and cultural relic of a bygone age.

- ... what he's writing into
- ... what he's trying to do
- ... what he's praying
- Tone kind of helps
- But at the end of the day, God's word is effective: so read it!

Groupwork:

*Read Psalm 90. What do you think the author is **doing** with these words?*

What difference does it make that they're addressed to God, and not to us?

What difference does it make that they're in a collection of prayers addressed to God?

What difference does it make that they introduce a section of the Psalms (Book IV) that is about finding hope after judgment?

What do you think it would look like to respond rightly to this Psalm?

*Read 2 Corinthians 3:7-11. Again, the key question is 'what do you think the author is **doing** with these words?'*

What makes it hard to apply a paragraph like this?

How might 3:12, 4:1, 4:16, 5:6 and 5:8 begin to give you some help as you think about what Paul is doing with these words? Paul is explaining _____

How do 1:13-14 and 5:12 make it clearer why Paul is telling the Corinthians this? What does Paul want for them?

Now read 6:1-2, 6:11-13 and 7:1-4. How might these verses fill out our understanding of what Paul is doing in this letter?

Now read 12:14, 13:1 and 13:9-10. How do these verses help us to understand what Paul is doing in this letter?

Now go back to 3:7-11. How might this particular paragraph contribute to that big picture?

But what about when we're teaching or preaching?

2. Teaching well means helping others to hear what God's word is doing

a. An assumption: applying well means getting specific

- Application is about giving people something to do
- Good application means giving lots of practical examples
- Good application in Bible study means lots of case studies

There's a place for this, but...

b. Good application is helping people to hear the big thing God's word is doing

- True rebuke
- True exhortation
- True admonition
- True encouragement
- True comfort
- True persuasion

Learning from **Hebrews**

c. Sometimes, multiplying actions, next steps and case studies gets in the way

d. The most impactful teaching

i. Talks

ii. Bible studies

e. 2 Corinthians 3:7-11 revisited

i. What Paul is doing: persuading

ii. What Paul is doing here: persuading about the **goodness** of gospel ministry

Conclusion: The key to good application is good listening

a. Good application is all about attentive listening...

b. ... because if we listen attentively, we'll discover that the word of God is already doing something

c. And we hear what it's doing when we put it into a full enough context