

SELF-FEEDER

E.A.R.S. — Application
October 15, 2023

Jesus often encouraged people to pay careful attention to his teaching. On one occasion, he spoke of the reason he used parables, saying, “For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them” (Matthew 13:15). He then said to his disciples, “But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear” (Matthew 13:16).

For disciples of all generations, listening to Jesus’ teaching is important. Each must make sure that he or she has ears to hear God’s Word. In our study, we are using the word “ears” as an acronym (E.A.R.S.) to guide us in studying the Bible. We’ve seen so far that the “E” stands for explanation. Now we want to consider the meaning of the “A” — application.

Once you have considered the original meaning of a passage (explanation), you are ready to move a step further in your Bible study. While explanation deals with what a passage of Scripture meant in its original context, application deals with its meaning for you. This is a critical and necessary step in Bible study. The Bible never personally impacts our lives until we consider such things. The American Puritan Jonathan Edwards once said, “God has appointed a particular and lively application of his Word to affect men’s hearts and affections.”¹ In what follows, we will consider two basic questions that can guide our attempts at application — “What do I need to believe?” and “How does what I believe impact my behavior?”

WHAT DO I NEED TO BELIEVE?

Many make a fatal mistake in application. In their quest to respond to the Bible’s teaching, they run to matters of behavior first. Never considering the importance of what they believe, they focus only on changing how they live. The end result is an approach to Bible study that is obsessed with life-enhancement, behavior modification, and personal improvement.

What is lost in such an approach to Bible study? Frankly, one cuts him or herself off from the experience of true Christianity. In an obsession with outward behavior, one bypasses the inward transformation Christ offers through his gospel. There are only two eventual outcomes from this approach — pride or despair. If one is able to achieve a degree of behavior modification apart from Christ, he or she is likely to be puffed up with

¹ Murray, H. Iain. *Jonathan Edwards A New Biography*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2008), 188-189.

pride because of his or her accomplishment. If one is unable to change his or her behavior apart from Christ, and this is the most likely outcome, he or she will be prone to despair over the inability to change.

What can a student of the Bible do to avoid such outcomes? How can one apply the Bible to his or her life in a way that will result in lasting change? Is there any way to insulate oneself from the tendency toward pride and despair? What is required to experience lasting life change through Bible study?

An understanding of the importance of sound Christian doctrine will help us in these matters. To effectively apply the Bible to our lives, we must first ask ourselves “What do I need to believe?” This is true because our beliefs drive our behavior. Stated another way, we could say that our Christian duty is rooted in Christian doctrine; or, we could say that truth is the foundation of all transformation. One has commented on these things by saying, “We cannot place behavior before belief because what we believe generally determines how we behave.”²

The Witness of Scripture

The priority of beliefs over behavior is emphasized throughout Scripture. When Isaiah received a vision of the Lord, he was first struck by realities related to God’s nature. He witnessed angels crying “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” (Isaiah 6:3). It was only when he was moved by an understanding of God’s character that he was compelled to life change. Comprehending the Lord’s holiness, he cried out, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” (Isaiah 6:5). Transformation of our behavior always comes after an understanding of God’s truth.

The format of Paul’s letters gives witness to these things as well. If you have ever read his letters in much detail, you will soon recognize that he has two basic subdivisions for much of his writing. He normally spends the first half of his letter focusing on Christian beliefs, truth, or doctrine. It is only after thoroughly dealing with such things that he moves on to talk about Christian behavior, transformation, and duties. If we want to be strong students of the Bible, we must follow Paul’s approach. Beliefs are of first importance. We must consider Christian doctrine before we can move on to talk of Christian duties.

The Indicative and the Imperative

Author, pastor, and seminary professor John Carrick has talked about these things in a book he has written on preaching. In “The Imperative of Preaching,” he encourages preachers to focus on Christian doctrine in preaching before they make any mention of Christian duties.³ He upholds Paul’s pattern of teaching as a model for all preachers. Before making appeals to behavior, preachers must proclaim the transformational truths Christians are to believe.

² Hawkins, O.S. *The Art of Connecting*. (Dallas, TX: GuideStone, 2004), 52.

³ Carrick, John. *The Imperative of Preaching*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002).

Carrick presses these points home by speaking of two moods of speech that are employed over and over again in Scripture — the indicative and the imperative. The indicative is a verb mood that “indicates.” It speaks of fixed realities and truths. In the Bible, we read about innumerable indicatives — Christian truths that reveal what God has done through the person and work of Christ. Romans 5:8 serves as an example of an indicative: “...but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Indicatives deal with beliefs. They focus on Christian faith and doctrine. They call believers to believe something. An imperative is a call to action. An example of such can be seen in Romans 12:10: “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.” Imperatives deal with behavior. They focus on Christian obedience and duty. They call believers to do something.

Many of our breakdowns in Bible study come about because we do not see the difference between the indicative and the imperative. We oftentimes falter and fail in our quest to be students of the Bible because we place behavior before beliefs. True transformation comes when we first identify what we must believe about God and his work on our behalf through his Son. One has said, “Holy practice will not flourish without sound doctrine.”⁴

So in your times of Bible study, remember the place of application. Don’t stop with explanation. And as you apply Scripture to your life, remember the paramount importance of Christian truth and doctrine. Resist the temptation to rush ahead to imperatives, making a list of things you ought to do. Start with the indicative. When consider a text of Scripture, first ask yourself, “What do I need to believe?” In studying, you will be confronted with things you need to believe about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, humanity, sin, the church, the spirit world, the end of time, and more. Make sure you have an eye on beliefs as you work at self-feeding from God’s Word.

IN WHAT WAY(S) SHOULD BELIEFS TRANSFORM MY BEHAVIOR?

Beliefs are foundational to the Christian life. What one believes determines the entire trajectory of one’s spiritual growth and advancement. However, it is important to note that the Christian life is not just about beliefs. How one lives is important as well. Sure, one wants to avoid an approach to Christian living that is only concerned with man-centered behavior modification. Nevertheless, Christian truth is intended to bring transformation. One has said, “Theology is application. If it doesn’t edify, it is worthless. It is not information for information’s sake. It should never be a vehicle of intellectual pride.”⁵

With these things in mind, our Bible study should ask more than “What do I need to believe?” It should also ask, “In what ways should beliefs transform my behavior?” When we study Scripture, we find several imperatives. Yes, there are numerous “indicatives” concerning what Christ has done on our behalf, but there are numerous imperatives as well. This tells us that our Bible study should have a focus on applying

⁴ Ryle, J.C. *Practical Religion*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 164.

⁵ Frame, John. *Studying Theology As A Servant of Jesus*. Retrieved at <https://frame-poythress.org/studying-theology-as-a-servant-of-jesus/>

Christian truths to how we live. In what follows, we will consider three questions that can guide how we apply God's truth to our behavior.

In What Way(s) Have I Broken God's Law?

Nowadays the word "law" has a bad reputation amongst many Christians. Many see it as having little to no place in the Christian experience. They assume that God's love wipes out nearly all obligations on humanity. If one will merely accept God's love, one will be forgiven of sins. Afterwards, the only requirement of humanity is to believe God's love and practice love toward God and others.

Indeed, Jesus has called his followers to love God and love others, but it is important that we understand the end goal of such matters. When Jesus issued his Great Commandment concerning love, he said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40). Notice the final words of Jesus' teaching. In particular, pay attention to his reference to "the Law and the Prophets." According to Jesus, the end goal of loving God and loving others is that one might fulfill what God's Law and God's prophets revealed in the Old Testament.

What does this have to do with our personal study of the Bible? More specifically, what does it have to do with our application of God's Word to our lives? Frankly, it has a lot to do with such things. If Jesus desires for us to fulfill God's Law through loving God and loving others, it stands to reason that we must study the Bible with an eye on God's Law.

What is God's Law?

Understanding the nature of God's Law can be confusing. When you study the Bible, you find multiple references to law. Sometimes, the Bible speaks of the Ceremonial Law that was specific for Israel alone. Such law involved all of the worship rituals of the Old Testament that provided a foreshadowing of the work of Jesus. In addition, the Old Testament makes frequent reference to Civil Law as well. Such law included all of the governmental laws for the nation of Israel. The purpose of these laws was to keep Israel safe and distinct from her corrupt neighbors.

The most common type of law in the Bible is that of the Moral Law. Such law is an expression of God's own holy character. It outlines his expectations and desire for human beings created in his image. The Bible teaches that God's Moral Law is indelibly etched in the heart and mind of every human being (Romans 2:14-15). All innately know there is a God and they innately understand that things like lying, killing, coveting, stealing, and committing adultery are intently wrong. Sure, there are some who suppress the knowledge of God's Law through sin (Romans 1:18), but such a reality does not disprove the existence of God's Law. It actually affirms it.

The Lord has given us an easy-to-remember, concise expression of his Moral Law in what are now known as the Ten Commandments. Take a moment to read them in Exodus 20:1-17. For generations and generations, many humans have recognized

the value of God's Law. Even those who do not profess faith in Christ appreciate the beauty and strength of the Lord's eternal commandments.

God's Law and Bible Study

How do these things help us in Bible study? I would propose that you should have an eye on the Ten Commandments as you read and study Scripture. If you want to be a healthy self-feeder, it helps to keep God's Law in mind. One has rightly said, "God's law is not a burden to break you but a train track to help you travel through life in tune with the creator."⁶ Because this is true, as you unlock the meaning of a passage of Scripture, you should take time to ask yourself, "In what ways have I broken God's Law?" Or, you could ask, "Is there any way I need to be more faithful to God's Law?"

Living by God's Law

Jesus saw the value of the Law. When he preached his famous Sermon on the Mount, he called people to obey God's Law by pointing out sins related to the sixth (Matthew 5:21-26), seventh (Matthew 5:27-30), ninth (Matthew 5:33-37) and tenth (Matthew 6:1-4) commandments. He taught in a number of ways in relation to the first three commandments (Matthew 6:5-24). Jesus obviously believed that the Ten Commandments had application to the lives of New Testament believers.

In fact, he summed up the entirety of his work on behalf of sinners by saying, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17). After living a life in which he perfectly kept God's Law, Jesus offered his sinless life for sinful law breakers like us (1 Peter 3:18). Because of what he has done on our behalf, we are regarded as perfect law keepers in the sight of God (Romans 8:4). One has summed up the relation of the Law to the gospel by saying, "The first message of the cross is the law of God, Christ was born under the law, lived under its obligations throughout his life, and bore the curse of the broken law in his own body on the tree."⁷

Getting Practical with the Law

As believers, we are called to make it our aim to fulfill God's Law practically in our lives by setting our affections on God and others. This is the meaning of the Great Commandment. Consequently, it makes sense that our Bible study should contribute to a greater devotion to the Lord and his Law. I remember when these things became personal for me. For years, I lived as a Christian with no understanding of how Jesus saved me so that my life may bear a resemblance to his character and his Moral Law. When I understood these things, it began to change the way I studied the Bible and prayed. I began looking for application to my life in reference to God's Moral Law. I also began daily confessing sin in reference to the Law.

⁶ Pfeiffer, David. Psalm 1 and Jesus Christ. *The Banner of Truth Magazine*: 703. (Edinburgh, U.K: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2022), 7.

⁷ Thomas, Geoffrey. *Ernest C. Reisinger: A Biography*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 238-239.

To become a healthy self-feeder, it is helpful to think of these realities. As you study passages of Scripture, ask yourself, “What does this passage say about my relationship to God via his Law?” Maybe the passage speaks of how you have violated God’s Law in some respect. Perhaps the passage tells of the way Christ fulfilled the Law of God on your behalf. Or a passage of Scripture could call you to fulfill or embrace God’s Law in an area of your life. Whatever the case, don’t view God’s Law as a dusty relic for a bygone era. Realize that it has practical application for your daily life. The Lord wants to shape you into a law keeper who gives great glory to him in a world of so much law breaking.

What Do I Need to Put Off?

Armed with an understanding of God’s Law, one is then able to approach Bible study with an eye on healthy application. Since God’s Law is fixed and immovable, God’s people are called to align their lives with its precepts. This calls for one of two responses to what one might learn through Bible study — repentance or obedience. The New Testament contains two injunctions that speak of these two responses — “put off” and “put on.”

In Ephesians 4:22, Paul said, “...put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires.” When we study God’s Word, we are frequently be called to put off ways of our old life. This involves repentance — a turning from sin. To be healthy self-feeders, we must be aware of such things. We must study Scripture with an eye on repenting and turning from indwelling sin.

The Reformer Martin Luther was one who was well aware of the need for repentance in the Christian life. Many mistakenly think of repentance as something for the moment of conversion alone. However, repentance is something one needs to practice throughout the Christian life. Commenting on Luther’s perspective, one has said, “As Martin Luther came to see, repentance is not a one-time or occasional act but a continual life of contrition – the acknowledgement of, sorrow for, and tuning from sin.”⁸ Another has analyzed Luther’s perspective, saying, “Martin Luther stressed this in the first of his famous Ninety-five Theses; ‘When our Lord Jesus Christ said “repent” he meant that the whole of the Christian life should be repentance.’”⁹

Interestingly, the word rendered “put off” in Ephesians 4:22 is one that was used in the ancient world for stripping off dirty clothes. For those who often walked dusty streets and worked in fields, the word was one that was likely used on a daily basis. It referred to the daily act of taking off defiled garments. As a result, it provided a fitting metaphor of something Christians are to do throughout the Christian experience. On a nearly daily basis, Christians should aim to strip off sins and shortcomings that defile. By the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, they should repent of thoughts, words, and deeds that go against the character of God. Times of personal Bible study

⁸ Willborn, N.C. Humility in Pastors and Elders. *Tabletalk: January 2022*. (Sanford, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2022), 15.

⁹ Ferguson, B. Sinclair. *Maturity: Growing Up and Going On in The Christian Life*. (Edinburgh, U.K: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2019), 173.

undoubtedly serve as a great help in this endeavor. As one self-feeds from God's Word, he or she should regularly ask, "What do I need to put off?"

What Do I Need to Put On?

Repentance isn't the only required response to Bible study and doctrine. At times, God's people need to practice obedience. Without obedience repentance will often be short lived and ineffectual. After giving the injunction for his readers to "put off" ungodly character in Ephesians 4, Paul also said, "...put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:25).

Jesus referred to the need for both "putting off" and "putting on" in one of his more mysterious teachings. Speaking of demons he said:

When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. Then it says, "I will return to my house from which I came." And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation (Matthew 12:43-45).

Jesus' words were a rebuke of the self-righteous Jews of his day. Though they had a manmade religion that made them look outwardly righteous, they did not practice true obedience to God's Word. Because of their lack of obedience they were susceptible to great spiritual peril.

Jesus' warning has meaning for us. If we don't study God's Word with an eye on obeying God's Word, we will face spiritual danger. In all of our Bible study, we should be asking, "What does God want me to obey?" One has said, "Obedience to God's commands is of major importance to true religion. It was in the Old Testament, and it is in the New Covenant. Just before going to the cross, our precious Lord said, 'If you love me, you will obey what I command' (John 14:15). Obeying commandments and doing good works are vital to Christianity."¹⁰

The Means of All Change

We've talked about the importance of God's Law, repentance, and obedience in Bible study. Before we conclude our discussion of application, it is important to consider the means of all spiritual change. We can seek to apply the Word of God to our lives, but ignorance concerning the real means of transformation will make our Bible study an empty religious endeavor. To experience life-changing application, we must rely on the transforming grace of God. One has said, "Perhaps you've thought of grace as a one-time deposit – something you needed at the beginning of your Christian life. But grace is

¹⁰ Chantry, Walter J. *Call the Sabbath a Delight*. (The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, UK 2017), 71.

more; it is the enduring power of God that brought you to life in Christ, keeps you in that life, and carries you home.”¹¹

In one of his letters, Peter told readers, “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen” (2 Peter 3:18). Grace is indeed active in the first forays into the Christian faith (Ephesians 2:8-9); however, it is something that is active throughout our Christian experience as well. In order to grow, repent, and obey, we must rely on God’s grace. John Bunyan was famous for saying, “God is pleased to give you more grace; therefore, go out and get more grace.”¹² Because of these things, seek after God’s grace as you seek to apply Scripture to your life.

Conclusion:

The letter “A” in our “E.A.R.S.” acronym indicates that “Application” is a key step in Bible study. To be strong self-feeders, we must ask “What does this passage mean to me personally?” Two questions help us apply Scripture to our lives: “What do I need to believe?” and “How do I need to behave?” God’s Word has something to say about our beliefs and our behavior, our doctrine and our duties, truth and personal transformation.

I recently read a biography about Ernest Reisinger, a business man and lay pastor who helped lead the resurgence of conservative Christianity within the Southern Baptist Convention. On one occasion, he spoke about his desire to be transformed by God’s Word by saying: “Let me tremble at God’s word, and let me, in reading it, keep three purposes in view: To collect facts rather than form opinions; To regulate practice rather than encourage speculation; To aid devotion rather than dispute.”¹³ As we study God’s Word, may we have a heart for personal transformation. Application is indeed a pivotal part of Bible study.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION/GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Read Ephesians 2:8-10. Based on your understanding of this passage, what are some things you might need to believe about God, Christ, and what the Lord has done for you?
2. Read Ephesians 2:8-10. Based on your understanding of this passage, how might the truth of the passage impact how you live?

¹¹ Vandoodewaard, Peter. The Reasons for Church Conflict. *Tabletalk: March 2022*. (Sanford, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2022), 7.

¹² Shared in The Puritan Conference Podcast by Pastor Joel Beeke, May 22, 2023, Episode: *The Puritans on Assurance*.

¹³ Thomas, 94.