

How To Apply The Meaning

This is our final study. We have been using the acronym “SMA” to teach us how to study the Bible. The “S” indicates that at first we are to ask, “What does it say?” Then we are to discover “What does it mean?” That is a difficult step in Bible study. Now we come to the most difficult step, the “A.” It tells us to ask, “How Does It Apply?”

We have collected many pieces of information about our passage that we have been studying. I will not review those pieces in this study. Our previous studies describe the pieces. Yet, there may be some pieces we missed.

Then we moved to the trenches. We have used the expression “trenches” to refer to bringing all the background information, meaning of words and phrases together, along with cross-references and the interpretations of others. We have also taken time to meditate on the passage to gain more insight into the passage. Those are the pieces of the puzzle that we have collected. At this point we should understand the meaning of the passage.

Assembling the Picture. Now before we discuss “How Does It Apply?” I want to offer five suggestions for using these pieces to assemble the picture.

- First, as you study record your findings and questions verse-by-verse.
- Second, as you collect new information, keep asking,

“How does all the information fit together?” Repeat this for each verse. You are putting the puzzle together piece-by-piece.

- Third, meditate on your findings to discover the purpose of the passage. This will create new questions and give you more insights into the passage.
- Fourth, when you have finished collecting the pieces, you will usually understand the meaning and the point of the passage.
- Fifth, then it is time to ask, “Why did the Holy Spirit put this into the Bible? How am I supposed to respond?” The answer to your question is the application. The

why and how questions usually lead us to the application.

Now it is time to ask, “What is the point?” of the passage and how do we apply the meaning? Our passage has been Matthew 15:21-28. Therefore, let’s look at the “fish” again.

The Canaanite Woman (Matthew 15:21-28).

Let us begin by re-reading Matthew 15:21-28. The passage says,

Jesus went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out, saying, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.” But He did not answer her



a word.

And His disciples came and implored Him, saying, “Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us.” But He answered and said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, “Lord, help me!” And He answered and said, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” But she said, “Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus said to her, “O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed at once.
Matthew 15:21-28 (NASB)

Principles of Application.

We have the pieces of the puzzle. We understand the meaning of the passage. Now it is time to consider four primary principles of application to help us discover the point, which will then lead us to the application. There are other principles related to prophecy and parables that we will not discuss. They primarily deal with symbolism. Yet, what we have discovered should be sufficient. The fundamental guiding principle is that we always understand Scripture literally unless it is obvious we should do otherwise.

1) Scripture has only one meaning but many applications. The first principle for determining the point and the application is that Scripture has only one meaning but can have many applications. The meaning and the point are unique. This will be illustrated soon. But there can

be many applications to the passage. That will also be illustrated soon.

2) Let scripture be its own blessing, do not spiritualize! The second principle is that scripture should be its own blessing. Do not spiritualize! This principle is violated too often. It occurs when we are desperately searching for an application, and we want to find an “Oh, wow!” But we need to let Scripture be its own blessing. I remember on one occasion that I was teaching the genealogies in Genesis 5. Afterwards a woman told me that she was surprised it was so meaningful. She had found treasure in what we normally consider to be very dry.

Here is an extreme example of spiritualizing a passage. It occurred when a couple came for counseling to Grace Community Church



in Panorama City, CA. The couple had come for counseling because they were having trouble in their relationship. They shared that the pastor of their church had taught about Israel’s defeat of the city of Jericho. He

had taught from Judges 6 that Israel had walked around Jericho seven times and then the walls fell down. Then he drew an application. He said that God had given dating couples a great biblical principle. If a man would walk around a woman seven times, the walls of her heart will fall down and she will love him and marry him if he would propose. That application violated both the meaning and wisdom. It is an extreme example of spiritualizing a passage.

When this occurs, it reveals someone should not be teaching! This is an example of *eisegesis*—forcing meaning and an application into Scripture.

Here is another example that I discovered some years ago. A pastor taught that,

Genesis 37 tells us that Joseph’s brothers threw him into a pit and later sold him to some Midianite traders who later sold him in Egypt. This is a great story that teaches us that our enemies can attack us and throw us into a pit, but we should not fear because God is the God of comeback and favor. God will never allow us to remain in the dirty pit of depression, despair, and depravity because His purpose is one of blessing, purpose, and breakthrough. It is time to overcome our pits! What is the pit that is facing your life today? Maybe it’s a financial pit. Maybe it’s an emotional pit. Maybe it’s a pit of sickness. Maybe it’s a relational pit. Well, prepare yourself while you are in that pit because God is about ready to bring you from the pit to the palace!

There is an element of truth in this statement. But the problem with this application is that God does not always choose to rescue us from our “pits.” This application violates other biblical principles too! All the apostles had tragic deaths. Steven was stoned to death. Sometimes God disciplines us and then simply stops the punishment. Nor does God always make us second in command to the “Pharaoh” in our life as He did for Joseph.

He missed the fact that the account prepares us for Exodus 1, which tells us that the Israelites are in Egypt. It teaches how Israel came into the land of Egypt. It also prepares us for the application given to us in Genesis 50:20 when Joseph makes

the point that God had a purpose. He said, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.” Spiritualization of Scripture is a very common problem with teachers. When practiced, it distorts the true meaning of Scripture.

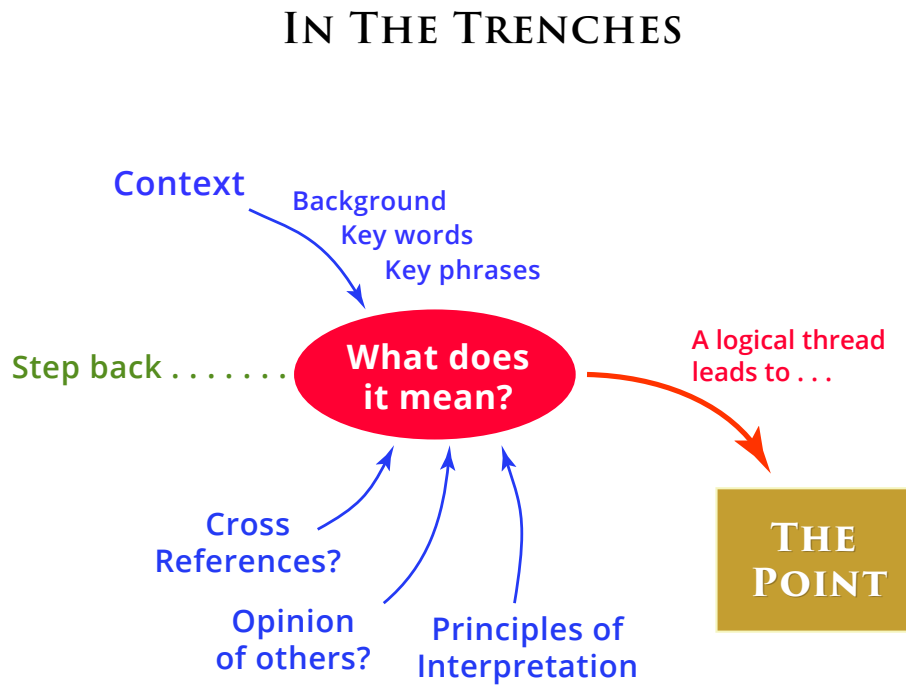
3) Avoid applying biblical promises given to Israel to another country. The third principle is, “avoid applying biblical promises given to Israel to another country.” 2 Chronicles 7:14 is a common violation of this principle. The passage says,

... and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land. 2 Chronicles 7:14 (NASB)

Some say the promise of 2 Chronicles 7:14 is a promise for

the United States of America. But the problem with that application is that it is not the meaning of the passage. The context reveals the promise was to the nation of Israel. The principle they are seeking is found in Jeremiah 18:7-10, but not in 2 Chronicles 7:14. 2 Chronicles 7:14 does not give them the application they are seeking, but Jeremiah 18:7-10 does. It says,

At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken



turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it; if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it. Jeremiah 18:7-10 (NASB)

4) Avoid forcing Scripture to fit our culture.

The fourth and last principle that we will discuss is, “Avoid forcing Scripture to fit our culture.” A common example of this is from 1 Timothy 2:11-13. The passage says,

A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. 1 Timothy 2:11-13

Some claim the passage actually permits woman pastors and elders. They state that Paul was patriarchal. They claim that Paul was objecting to uneducated women teaching men. But Paul never says anything like this about men. So, does that mean Paul permitted uneducated men to teach? The point is the passage transcends culture.

Discovering the Point. Now, if the point of the verse, passage, or chapter is not clear, we need to ask three questions:

1. What is the climax of the account?
2. What is the theme of the account?
3. What is the most significant event of the account?

It may also be helpful to outline the passage to discover the point.

We are still in the trenches, and it is now time to apply what we have learned to Matthew 15:21-28. Remember that all of the pieces that we have discovered should lead us to the point. So, what do you think is the point of the passage? What is the climax of the passage?

I believe the point of the passage is that the Canaanite woman had great faith. Everyone who was watching the

woman and Jesus discovered the woman had great faith. She was an illustration for us of great faith. The disciples and everyone watching had an opportunity to learn what is great faith. We must add that the Holy Spirit recorded this for us so that we can learn what great faith is like.

John Chrysostom, who lived about A.D. 347-407, wrote this about this passage,

For note that Christ did not say, “Let your little daughter be made whole,” but “Great is your faith, be it done for you as you desire.” These words were not uttered at random, nor were they flattering words, but great was the power of her faith, and for our learning.¹

Martin Luther, who lived about 1483 to 1546, said,

We see here why the Lord presented himself so unyielding and refused to hear her, not because he wanted to present an unfriendly image as not wanting to help her, but rather that her faith might be so evident, that the Jews who were the children and heirs of the kingdom might learn from the Gentile, who was not among the children and had no inheritance, how they were to believe in Christ and place all confidence in him. Her faith pleases him so much that he can no longer hide his compassion and kindness, and he states, “O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee as thou wilt.”²

Discovering the Main Application. This leads us to the application. How can we have great faith? To answer that question we must discover what great faith is. This creates more questions. What in the passage illustrates great faith?

In order to do this, meditate on the account and look for sub-points that support the application. If you cannot find any, then maybe you have the wrong application. Imagine being one or more of the characters. What would you have

1. Thomas C. Oden. Matthew 14-28. Ancient Christian Commentary. InterVarsity Press. 2002. vol. 1b, p. 245. pp. 30.

2. Martin Luther. Complete Sermons of Martin Luther. Baker Books. 2000. vol. 5. pp. 325-326.

learned if you were that person? How would you have felt? If you are teaching, prepare everyone for the application along the way or punch it at the end. Illustrate the application and use scripture cross-references.

My Application. Now I want to conclude our study by sharing what I believe is the application. I would like to add quickly that there are many possible applications as the Holy Spirit may apply it differently to different individuals.

First, I searched for examples of faith. I found that Matthew records four times when Jesus told the disciples that they had “little faith.” In Matthew 6:30 Jesus reveals that “little faith” worries. In Matthew 8:26, He rebukes the dis-

faith is Mark 7:25 when it says the woman fell down at Jesus’ feet. That is, she worshiped Him.

... a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately came and fell at His feet. Mark 7:25 (NASB)

Great faith worships the correct person. Great faith worships in spirit and truth according to John 4:24. This Canaanite woman was a Gentile from a culture immersed in pagan worship. The preceding context has taught us that our mouth reveals our hearts. She is displaying her heart. She is worship-



ciples for having fear, and tells them they have “little faith.” In Matthew 14:31 He equates “little faith” with doubt. The fourth time it is obvious that “little faith” is anxious. When we come to our study in Matthew 15:21-28, Jesus had already rebuked the disciples three times for “little faith.” So, when Jesus declared the woman had great faith right in front of the disciples, I believe He did that so that they would know what is great faith.

So, what is great faith? Would you like to have great faith? The passage is about “great faith.” The woman is an illustration of great faith. Now the application starts. This is the “how to respond.”

1) *Great Faith Worships God.* The first truth about great

ing and begging for help. She is displaying humility. Hebrews 11:4 teaches us that faith worships God when Abel offered a sacrifice that was pleasing to God.

2) *Great Faith Believes God.* The second truth of great faith is that it believes in God. This woman believed that Jesus could heal her daughter. Hebrews 11:5-6 illustrates this truth from the life of Enoch, who pleased God because he believed God was and is a rewarder of those who seek Him. Hebrews 11:7 illustrates this truth about great faith from the life of Noah who believed God built an ark. That is, great faith worships the true God and believes Him, even when it does not seem to make sense.

3 & 4) *Great Faith Persists and is Humble.* The third and

fourth truths about great faith is that true faith persists and is humble. She is an example of both. She persisted because she believed Jesus could heal her daughter. As a Gentile woman, she was humble from the beginning even unto the end. I think Jesus wanted the disciples to see her faith because they had “little faith.” They had fear, doubt, and anxiety.

Hebrews 11:8-22 illustrates these principles first in the life of Abraham even to the point of being ready to kill Isaac in humble submission, then in the lives of Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob. Matthew 5:3-4 is also an illustration.

Some claim that persistence in prayer is illustrated by her. While I believe that is true, I think the primary application is, “Do you want great faith like this woman?” Persistence in prayer is a legitimate application. Romans 4:18-22 is a great illustration of persistence from the life of Abraham.

5) *Great Faith is Willing to Suffer.* The fifth truth of great faith is that it is willing to suffer for God. Because of her faith in Jesus, she was willing to suffer humiliation. She did. She was rewarded. When Jesus announced that she had great faith, the disciples would have noticed along with everyone else present.

Conclusion. The Holy Spirit had this event recorded in the pages of Scripture so that down through church history, every believer can know that great faith worships God, always believes in God, and humbly persists. The woman finally completely humbled herself. She suffered by admitting she was like a dog. When she told Jesus,

Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table. Matthew 15:27 (NASB)

She was telling Jesus that she was willing to eat even the filthy crumbs. She was willing to receive whatever Jesus wanted to give. There were no more demands. She had humbled herself. That is an important mark of real faith. It humbles itself before God. She did that. Jesus had been working to bring her to this point. Then the disciples saw real faith and now we do too!

I found in my own experience that if I am pleading with God about some issue, I do not find peace until I am like her. I do not find peace until I am willing to receive even a dirty

crumb or no crumb at all. Now that is the mark or evidence of great faith. Great faith trusts and humbly yields. Now I am not saying that I have great faith. But she had great faith, because Jesus said she had great faith. Do you have great faith?