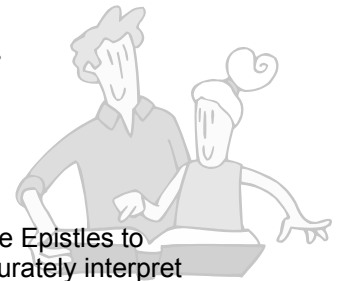


# How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

## Lesson 4: The Epistles: How do I apply them?



### Introduction

This lesson is designed to help you understand how to apply the message from the Epistles to your everyday life. There are important things that you need to understand to accurately interpret and apply the text. Let's briefly review what an Epistle, Exegesis, and Hermeneutics are and lay some groundwork for this lesson.

**Epistle** – a type of letter that is intended to be read and understood by the public

The last chapter was focused on learning how to exegete epistles. Let's define exegesis again:

**Exegesis** – to carefully study the Bible to determine its intended meaning to the original audience

This chapter is focused on the hermeneutics of exegesis. Let's define hermeneutics again:

**Hermeneutics** – taking the intended message for the original audience and translating it to today's audience (you)

The diagram below illustrates exegesis and hermeneutics:



This is a very important concept for us to learn! If there is anything that I can impart to you in this lesson it is the following statement:

**Nothing is more powerful than the Word of God accurately applied to a situation!**

**Hebrews 4:12** – “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (NASU)

It would seem that knowing how to apply the message from the original audience would be easy. Don't we just do what the Bible says? Why do we need to consider whether what the Epistles say directly applies to our life or whether we need to translate them in some way?

The Epistles were written to a 1<sup>st</sup> century audience. We need to know whether the commands given to them were absolute commands that apply to everyone in every age or whether they were cultural expressions of absolute commands.

### What's the Difference between a Cultural Command and an Absolute Command?

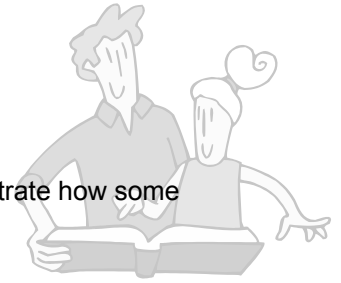
Let's start off by defining these two terms.

**Cultural command** – A command that is based upon the way a Biblical principle would be fulfilled in a specific culture.

**Absolute command** – A command that is the same, regardless of what culture you are from.

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Maybe the best way to understand this is to look at a couple of examples that illustrate how some Biblical commands are definitely cultural.

### **Example 1: Christian Greetings**

If you were to tell me how to show affection and love toward my brother or sister in Christ when we met on the street, how would you do it?

**A warm handshake, a smile, an embrace would suffice.**

How would they do this back in Biblical times? (Look at Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:26)

**A holy kiss.**

What is the underlying Biblical principle behind these commands? Has this principle changed?

**Show your Christian love to your brothers and sisters in Christ. No, it hasn't changed.**

### **Example 2: Promises**

If you were to make a serious promise to me, how would you do it?

**Swear to someone, sign a contract, give your word.**

How would someone in Old Testament times do this? (Look at Genesis 24:2, 24:9, 47:29)

**Put their hand under the other's thigh and swear.**

*How do we know if a Command is Cultural or Absolute?*

Before we start looking into the details of how to determine whether a command is cultural or absolute, we need to establish this principle:

Most commandments in Scripture are **ABSOLUTE** and do not require a lot of cultural translation!

There are a couple of basic rules we must use when interpreting Scriptures:

**Rule 1: A Text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or his or her readers.**

We can't take a text and turn it into something that it isn't. Let's look at an example.

**3 John 1:2** - "Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well." (NIV)

Many people in the "Prosperity Gospel" movement say that this passage teaches that it is God's will for us to always be healthy and wealthy. Does this passage mean that? Why or why not?

**This passage is simply a greeting and a prayer blessing to Gaius from John. He didn't intend it to be a doctrinal statement and Gaius didn't perceive it to be a doctrinal statement because it doesn't fit into the flow or structure of the letter.**

**Rule 2: Whenever we have the same specific life situations as the original audience, God's Word to us is the same as His Word to them!**

2 John 1:5-6 – John speaks of our duty to love one another and defines love.

Is there anything that limits this statement to John's culture or does it apply to everyone at every time? Why or why not?

**Loving others is a basic Biblical principle that is illustrated throughout Scriptures. It's expression may be partly cultural, but the commandment isn't.**

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### *The Problem of Misusing Passages beyond their Original Intention*

One of the reasons we see so many different interpretations of Scripture is that many people use passages out of context and say that they mean something they never meant. An example of this is the “Prosperity Gospel” preachers using 3 John 1:2 to say that God always wants us to be healthy and wealthy. How do we know when an interpretation has gone to far?

**Rule 3: Whenever there are comparable situations and comparable particulars, God’s Word to us must always be limited to its original intent.**

Let’s look at Colossians 3:15 as an example. Many people say that when we are trying to make a decision about a difficult issue, God will give us a peace in our hearts to know what is right. Is it correct or incorrect to use Colossians 3:15 to prove this point?

By reading this passage in context, we can see that it is speaking about church unity and everyone getting along. To use it as a proof text for praying until you have a special peace from God is to use it out of context and extend it beyond its original intention.

### *The Problem of Applying a Specific Situation in Scripture to a Very Different Situation Today*

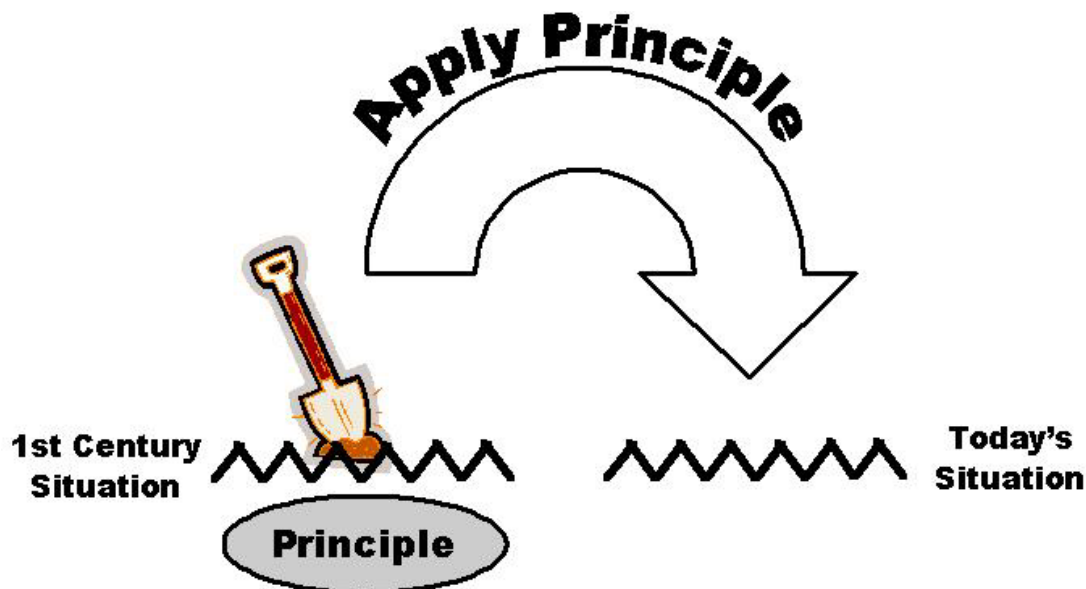
Many times when we are studying Epistles, we run into texts that deal with very specific issues that existed at that time. Those passages often fit into two categories:

1. Those that address a 1<sup>st</sup> Century issue that wouldn’t happen today
2. Those that address a 1<sup>st</sup> Century issue that might happen today, but probably wouldn’t

How do we handle these texts? Do they still hold any relevance for today? The answer is, Yes, they do. Let’s look at this next rule and a couple of examples.

**Rule 4: Whenever we run into a passage that addresses an issue that wouldn’t happen today or probably wouldn’t happen today, we must use the following steps:**

- a) Make sure you understand all the specifics about the 1<sup>st</sup> Century issue.
- b) Make sure you understand the underlying principle.
- c) Use your understanding of the specifics and the underlying principle to use the principle on a genuinely comparable situation today.



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### Example 3: Applying a First Century Issue that Wouldn't Happen Today

An example of the 1<sup>st</sup> kind of text, a first century issue that wouldn't happen today, is Philemon 1:8-20. In this passage, Paul is writing to Philemon, a brother-in-Christ, who owned a slave named Onesimus who had escaped and ran away to Rome. While in Rome, he happened to meet Paul, who was imprisoned in Rome. Onesimus heard the gospel and was saved. Paul then encouraged Onesimus to return to Philemon and bring this letter along with him.

- a) What are some of the specifics we need to understand about this situation?
- Slavery in pre-American time was usually much different than we are accustomed to. They were often slaves because of their debt, not because they were taken against their own will. Slaves were generally not considered to be a lesser person, although they did often make up a separate social class. Many slaves were educated and serve as teachers, doctors, etc...
  - By running away from Philemon, he wasn't escaping from an oppressive situation; he was running away from his responsibility. Onesimus had not been wronged; Philemon was the one who was wronged.
- b) What are some of the underlying principles in this passage?
- Getting saved doesn't relieve you of your responsibilities or the consequences that may have incurred as a result of sin.
  - We shouldn't force people into being charitable. True charity should come from the heart and be a willing gesture.
  - God's providence is so great that He can use an evil situation and turn it into something good (v. 15)
  - Being brothers and sisters in Christ is a relationship that takes precedence over any other relationship we might have between each other. Even though we might be a mother, father, son, daughter, worker, or boss in the flesh, if we are also fellow Christians, we should make sure that all we do is in love. We still have to fulfill those other relationships, but with a new attitude!
- c) Based on what you have learned from this passage, you should a church respond the following situation:

Betty loved to spend money. She was a compulsive shopper and couldn't go into a store without buying something. She believed that getting that next thing would make her happy, but whenever she got it she just wanted something else. Over the years she racked up several thousand dollars in debt. It was overwhelming to her. God used the consequences of her sin to convict her and she turned her life over to the Lord and got saved. She knew that when she was saved, the Lord had forgiven her of all her sins, including the way she had poorly managed her money before. Because God had forgiven her, Betty believed that she shouldn't have to pay the consequences for her past sins. Betty approached her Pastor and asked him about whether it was okay to declare bankruptcy because God had forgiven her of her past sins. What does Philemon 1:8-20 teach us about how to handle this situation?

When we are saved God forgives us of all of our past sins. That doesn't mean that we are delivered from the earthly consequences of those sins. If we have incurred a debt, we are still responsible to pay it. In fact, our willingness to pay our debts in a timely manner is a good witness to the world around us. Onesimus demonstrated that he had truly been saved by his willingness to go back to Philemon. Proverbs 22:7 says, "The rich ruleth over the poor, and the borrower [is] servant to the lender." Betty needs to pay off her debt and fulfill her obligations.

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### Example 4: Applying a Text Relating a Situation that Could Happen but Probably Wouldn't

A good example of the 2<sup>nd</sup> kind of text, one which could happen but probably wouldn't, is in 1 Corinthians 5:1-11. In this passage, Paul speaks to a specific situation in which a man was committing adultery with his step-mother.

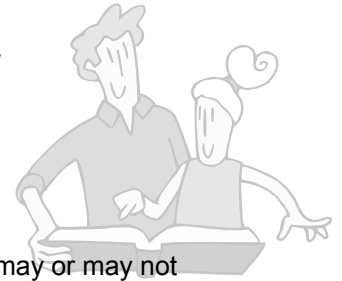
- a) What are some of the specifics we need to understand about this situation?
- The man was committing adultery and incest at the same time. This is clearly a violation of God's Word (Lev. 18:8) and an excludable offense if the man doesn't repent (1 Cor. 6:9).
  - These people in the church were prideful (arrogant, puffed up) and were not handling the situation, despite the fact that the man persisted in this behavior. They may have attributed their "tolerance" to their love for him, which resulted in their pride.
  - Paul made it clear that this man was to be excluded from the church because of his persistence in sin.
- b) What are some of the underlying principles in this passage?
- Doing nothing about sin in the church is not an option.
  - Tolerance of sin in the church is not true love or true mercy because it is selfish in nature and is not concerned about the well-being of the other party.
  - Sin in one member affects all the members because it destroys the spirituality and credibility of the church.
  - Casting someone out of the church delivers them to Satan for judgment so that they may be punished and desire to return to the Lord
  - Someone who is excluded from the church should know that they have been excluded because they lose the intimacy of our fellowship. That doesn't mean we don't love them or talk to them. It means that all of our communication with them should be centered on winning them back, not pretending that nothing ever happened.
- c) Based on what you have learned from this passage, you should a church respond the following situation:

Bob was a single man who was a member of the church. He attended every Sunday and was even the song leader at church. No one could sing as well as Bob and he definitely made their song services much more enjoyable. Bob dated someone for quite awhile and brought her to church every Sunday. In accordance with the customs of our society, they moved in together before they were married. It wasn't a secret in the church that if they were living together that they were indulging in fornication. They both still came to church. Many people in the church prayed for Bob and felt that if they just gave him enough time that the Lord would convict him or maybe they would just get married and that would "solve" the problem. Some people had privately confronted Bob about the issue but he didn't feel it was a big deal and he kept coming to church every week along with his girlfriend. Many in the church believed that they were demonstrating the merciful love of Christ by not seeking to discipline him from the church. What does 1 Corinthians 5:1-11 teach us about how we should handle this situation? How would your proposed solution help Bob and the church?

Bob should be approached by an individual, two or three, and then eventually by the whole church about the sin in his life. If he ignores all of these, he should be excluded from the church. This is the best way to truly love Bob and even his girlfriend. Hopefully the Lord will convict Bob and bring him to a place of repentance and restoration with the church.

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### *The Problem of Cultural Relativity*

Let's establish some more rules that will help us in sorting through passages that may or may not have elements that are cultural within them.

#### **Rule 5: Distinguish between the core of the Bible's message and secondary teachings that are based on the core.**

Certain topics in Scriptures are undoubtedly core concepts and teachings that are independent of any cultural adaptation. Others are secondary teachings built upon the core concepts. Sometimes, the secondary teachings are absolute as well and sometimes they are cultural expressions. Try to name five core teachings and five secondary teachings in Scriptures.

*Core Teachings:* Nature of Man, Love, Purity, Truth, Jesus' Deity

*Secondary Teachings:* Women wearing head coverings, Holy Kiss, Church Discipline, Church Government, and Spiritual Gifts

#### **Rule 6: Distinguish between what is blatantly right or wrong and things that are only right or wrong within a given context.**

List five things within Scripture that are definitely right or wrong and five things that are only right or wrong within a specific situation.

*Always Right or Wrong:* Homosexuality, Lying, Loving your Neighbor, Prayer, Adultery

*Only Right or Wrong under Certain Circumstances:* Women teaching, Foot washing, Holy Kiss, Head Coverings, Speaking in Tongues

#### **Rule 7: Make a special note of items where the New Testament is uniform and consistent and where it reflects differences.**

A good example of an item where the New Testament reflects differences is in regard to money. Compare the following passages: Luke 12:33, 18:22, and 1 Timothy 6:17-19.

How do these passages differ?

The passage in Luke instructs individuals to sell all they have while the passage in 1 Timothy allows the rich to keep their money but to use it wisely and not be selfish.

What is the reason for the difference?

Luke 12:33 – These disciples were about to be used to take the gospel out to the world

Luke 18:22 – Jesus was showing this young man where his heart was at

1 Timothy 6:17-19 – This is an absolute command for us under normal circumstances.

#### **Rule 8: Make sure to differentiate between principles and the specific application of the principles. Sometimes a writer may use a universal principle to support a cultural application.**

The issue of women wearing head coverings in church is a great example of this rule. Before we start, let's make sure we have a proper perspective. Read the following passage:

**Galatians 3:28** – "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." (KJV)

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Now, read 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and answer the following questions:

What are the underlying principles taught in this passage?

God and Christ are equal but have different roles. Similarly, man and woman are equal but have different roles. Husbands and wives should be unified in their service to the Lord and fulfill their role. A woman or a man that does not fulfill their intended role is a disgrace to their family.

What are the cultural applications taught in this passage?

Men should not cover their heads while in the church setting and women should not uncover their heads while in the church setting.

How are the absolute principles and cultural applications connected?

Paul uses the absolute principles to support the cultural application in this church. We would do very similar things if we were to talk about men wearing dresses and a woman wearing a suit and tie.

**Rule 9: Try to understand how many acceptable cultural options were available at the time the text was written**

- If there was only one option and the Bible stuck with it, the option may be just cultural.
- If there were several options available and the Bible picked one specifically, it is more likely to be a universal principle.
- If the Bible bucked the existing cultural options and created a new way of doing things it is almost definitely a universal principle.

Let's look at examples of each of these situations:

- 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 – Women wearing head coverings was the only cultural option for moral people
- 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 – Homosexuality (abusers of themselves with mankind) was both affirmed and discouraged by writers at that time
- Galatians 3:28 – The spiritual equality of all people was NOT taught in these cultures

**Rule 10: Keep in mind cultural differences that exist which affect how we apply certain passages.**

Read Romans 13:1-7 and consider the government that the recipients of this letter were under. Would they apply it in different ways than we would today?

We live in a republic / democracy that affords us the opportunity to vote on who represents us and on what policies our government should take. Not all people in Rome had this option. In either case we should submit, but we have the opportunity to vote.

**Rule 11: Keep love in mind. From time to time you may find good men and women on two different sides of an issue.**

I have a lot of friends that are fellow ministers within Missionary Baptist Churches. I don't always agree with them on every issue. Yet, we have a commonality of what we consider to be central teachings of Scriptures. We should expect this to some degree even within our own mission work. We should always let love rule our interactions with one another and occasionally we may have to agree to disagree.

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### *The Problem of having Scriptures written only by Occasion*

One key principle we should reiterate is that the New Testament epistles were written on specific occasions for specific reasons. They were answering questions asked by the churches or addressing problems within the church. This raises a couple more final rules that we need to lay down before moving on.

#### **Rule 12: Because Epistles were written as the result of specific incidences in the churches, we don't always know everything we would like to know.**

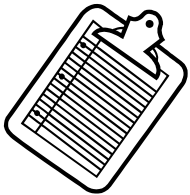
In Scripture, God gives us all we NEED, not necessarily all we WANT! A good example of this is 1 Corinthians 6:1-3. What does this passage tell us about the future of believers? What doesn't this passage teach us about this future event?

We learn from this passage that the saints (all believers) will stand in judgment against the rest of the unbelieving world and also the rebellious angels. We don't know how this will happen or what our specific role will be.

#### **Rule 13: Sometimes we have unanswered questions because we are asking our questions rather than asking their questions.**

1 Corinthians is one of the most famous examples of this problem. There was a specific list of questions this church had sent the Apostle Paul that we don't have today. See 1 Corinthians 7:1. Because of this, we have to play a bit of Jeopardy with the Bible and try to deduce the questions based on the detailed answers the Lord has given us.

### *Next Assignment:*



- **How to Read the Bible for All its Worth**

- Read Chapter 5: *The Old Testament Narratives: Their Proper Use*