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LISTENING FOR THE APPLICATION

The secret to good application is good listening. The better we listen to the Bible, the better we'll apply it. But the trouble is that we often think of application as something we do once we have stopped listening. We might think that application comes *after* listening: once you have worked out what the passage is saying, you need to think about what it means for you and your hearers. Or we might think that application comes *before* listening: you begin with an idea of the thing you'd like to achieve, and then you find the passage that you hope will do it. Either way, response is severed from attentive listening. You may listen after you apply. You may listen before you apply. If you're at all interested in expository preaching, you'll certainly want to listen at some point. You listen for the big idea, because the Bible is authoritative over our attempts to construe its meaning. But then the application is not about listening. It is in your hands. Does the Bible have authority to constrain our response? Is application about listening?

The argument of this chapter is that it is. Good application really does come from good listening. But first, it's worth exploring how our approach to application might *stop* us from listening carefully to the Bible.

Application and a listening deficit

Using the Bible

The most obvious way in which application might get in the way of attentive listening is when we want to use the Bible to achieve our agenda. At the extreme end, this is obviously offensive. One of the Cornhill staff once heard a sermon on 'breakthrough' from Mark 2:1-12. We can achieve breakthrough in our lives by imitating the desperation, the determination and the daring of the paralytic's friends. It is difficult to imagine that the preacher spent very long listening to Mark's gospel at all. From the outside, this looks like a sermon that began life as the speaker's desire to speak on 'breakthrough', a suitably trendy theme. The desire then grew legs, arms, eyes, and scoured the gospels for a text until it happened upon a passage where some people broke through something – in this case, a roof. The careful student of Mark might point out that neither the friends nor the man are the primary subject of this episode, however laudable their determination might have been. Far better to focus on Jesus, or even the religious leaders. The careful student of Mark might ask whether Mark himself would have had any notion of the preacher's idea of 'breakthrough'. But the point is that this preacher wasn't interested in studying Mark; he only wanted to use it.

The temptation can come in a much subtler and worthier form. We detect that our congregation is lacking in evangelistic zeal, and so we prescribe them the medicine of Philippians to get them behind gospel partnership. We

have an upcoming building project, and so we reach for Nehemiah. We're about to make a statement on sexuality and gender, so we teach our way through the opening chapters of Genesis.

In many ways, this is absolutely right. Peter Adam has helpfully described the Bible as a medicine cabinet, full of different spiritual medicines to treat different spiritual conditions. Part of our job as preachers is to plan sermon series. Far better to ask, 'what does this church most need to hear now?' than 'what would I like to have a crack at next?' If we detect a need for change, we should want the Word of God to lead it.

Nevertheless, the danger remains. Peter Adam's metaphor presupposes that we're good enough pharmacists to understand our medicine, and good enough physicians to understand our patients. We ought to be. But the agenda can take over. Every sermon on Philippians becomes a fresh call to evangelism, whether or not that is Paul's intention. Every sermon on Genesis 2-4 becomes a position paper on sexuality, gender, and work, whether or not that was Moses' aim. The good desire to reach for the right medicine to treat this specific ailment has taken over, and we're no longer really listening. Was Moses trying to achieve something else? Was he medicating a different condition? I'm unlikely to notice.

Spotting applications

There is a second way in which the rush to apply might stop us from listening: we might settle for *spotting* applications. For example, a preacher working through Mark 1:35-39

might make hay with verse 35. Here is a mandate for the Christian quiet time: 'The Lord Jesus himself made a priority of prayer. He made a priority of prayer by withdrawing from society. He made a priority of prayer by rising early. He made a priority of prayer even when his friends did not understand him. And in the same way, we ought to make a priority of prayer too.'

We might think that this is harmless enough. There is nothing wrong with prayer, there is nothing wrong with encouraging it in a sermon, and there's nothing wrong with taking Jesus as an example. But this application did not come from listening to Mark, and Mark has not taught us about the priority of prayer. It came from a pre-existing list of worthy applications, derived from a combination of the imperative sections of New Testament epistles and the preacher's evangelical heritage. The preacher listened to Mark just long enough to notice something that sounded like good Christian application, to spot it, and then he was ready for launch.

This is the trouble with character studies in the Old Testament, teaching 1-2 Samuel to learn lessons from David or Judges to learn lessons from Samson. It's not that this is inherently wrong. There is a place for enjoying the heroes of the Old Testament (let's call it Hebrews 11). And often enough, we are supposed to associate with, or dissociate from, the behaviour of the characters in Old Testament narrative. In all sorts of ways, Abraham, David, Jonathan and Joshua are exemplary. Even Samson has his moment in the sun.