

APPLYING EPHESIANS

KELLY BURTON | MARCH 4, 2020

God will even the score. Stay awake and He will keep you safe. Every sermon listener ought to hear a short pithy statement throughout your sermon that contains two essential elements: what is true about a Bible text, and what God expects them to do. I have been asked to write on the subject of applying Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

I recently received an email from a faithful member who began, "*God will even the score. Stay awake and He will keep you safe.*" She went on to say, "I heard the Holy Spirit loud and clear through you today. I plan to deepen my commitment to God in order to stay close to Him." She got it! I wish I could say I get those emails all the time, but I don't. So, we keep at it, don't we? How sad that so many listeners leave our churches wondering, "So what?" Can you imagine going to a restaurant that doesn't serve food? Of course not. So, don't leave your congregation hungry for what to do after listening to your sermon.

Considering my readers are those who mine the Scriptures weekly and deeply, I want to narrow my article on application to *applying the doctrinal chapters* of Ephesians. While I was thinking about writing this article, I watched my wife prepare our evening meal. Step by step she carefully followed the prescribed directions until at last, she served a delightful dinner perfect to the palate. Unfortunately, when dealing with doctrinal texts there are no step by step methods getting from explanation to illustration to application. Gregory K. Beale echoes my point, "*If you don't work at understanding [the book], you will have difficulty grasping its message.*" Our calling is to study; to allow the doctrine to plow deep into our own lives, then graciously call the church to obedience as well. They can tell if you are taking your own medicine.

Think about these words from Jay Adams, "*Doctrinal truth should be preached as practical truth, and forcefully applied to people who divisively put themselves and their own interests first in the congregation.*" Christian doctrine was preached in the Spirit with conviction by the apostles. *Doctrine has no expiration date.* We too must remind our listeners who God is, what God has done for us, and what kind of people God expects us to be.

A common way of thinking through Ephesians is to consider chapters 1–3 as rich theological content regarding our salvation, and chapters 4–6 as practical life-application. Out of Paul's forty-four imperatives within Ephesians, *only one* occurs before 4:25. So, forty-three of the forty-four imperatives are located from 4:25–6:17. Nonetheless, we don't want to jettison life application of the first three chapters. *Doctrine fortifies the church.*

Daniel Doriani has a helpful "*Checklist for Preachers*" as we approach doctrine and its application. He poses that we ask three questions of the text: "*Who needs this doctrine? What does God require? What does God promise?*" Or, consider the Puritans. For the Puritans, the sermon was not a motivational message but an intellectual exercise. The Puritan preacher saw it his duty to his congregation to catechize the saints in his care. They divided their sermons under three headings, *Explanation, Doctrine, then Usage or Application.* We ought to embrace the philosophy of preaching that doctrine is and must be applicable! Or as one put it, *Creeds lead to deeds.* This is especially important to remember as we set about Ephesians.

I want to use the remainder of this article to address *life application of doctrinal texts in Ephesians.* They are rich in doctrine, yet *without* clear-cut instruction, *without* imperative verbs to guide us in application. Mull over these four doctrinal texts from Ephesians chapters 1-2, and four main idea statements that can help steer you to a worthy application.

Ephesians 1:1–6 A Family Inheritance. Bursting with blessings Paul underscores three theological truths about God's grace. God *chose* us, God *predetermined* our destiny, and God *adopted* us into His family! Life application? Grace demands a response, a thankful response. Consider this Sermon in a Sentence: *God freely gave you a wealth of spiritual privilege. Give yourself back to Him; serve in the local church, steward your time and money to God, sign up for local missions.*

Ephesians 1:7–12 An Anthem of Praise. The rich doctrine of *redemption* permeates this section. Paul highlights a number of implications as a result of our redemption that the expositor must herald to his hearers. God forgave us! Are *you* withholding forgiveness from someone today? Sermon in a Sentence: *God is pressing His finger into your chest. Stop hoarding God's grace!*

Ephesians 1:11–14 Sealed for Your Protection. *Eternal security* is another Christian doctrine Paul affirms in these verses. Sermon in a Sentence: *The Father guarantees eternal life to those who believe. Stop doubting your destiny; keep on believing.*

Ephesians 2:1–10 From the Grave into Glory. Paul describes life before Christ as utterly hopeless and mankind as prisoners groping around in darkness. But God regenerated us and gave us the ability to believe! Sermon in a Sentence: *Salvation is a work of God. Abandon the notion of working your way to heaven and confess your need for Christ today.*

Once we have identified our preaching pericope, we ask the author what he is trying to say. Sum it up with a **Sermon in a Sentence** like the ones above and include the second person pronoun *you* to grab their attention. Reinforce the sentence throughout your sermon: after your introduction, after each point, in your conclusion, and in your invitation. This takes work. Consider again Doriani: *“Doctrinal statements often grow from efforts to bring the truths of God's acts and character to bear on new situations, so we can see them aright and behave correctly in them.”* The word of God summons us, yes, subpoenas us, to call our listeners to obedience from the doctrinal texts of Ephesians.

Kelly Burton is the Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Alba, Texas.

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