

# Preach the Word

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## Joy and Confidence from the Basics - Part 4

By Mark Paustian

A drill sergeant is giving an order to a cadet.

Sergeant: "There is no talking during drill."

Cadet: "Yes, sir. The fellas were just explaining that to me."

Sergeant: "Be quiet, cadet! There is no talking during drill!"

Cadet: "Sergeant. I know all about that. Like I was saying...."<sup>1</sup>

On it goes. The cadet takes the sergeant's words as a communication of information. What is he missing? Only what the words have to do with him.

What we have here is a failure of application.

The Scriptures communicate the costliest information that can be thought of: preeminently who Jesus is and what he has done. But the Word is not a communication of information alone, but of capability as well—to repent, to speak, to persevere. As Paul instructed (Titus 2), the grace of God is teaching us how to live as we wait on Jesus' return.

*They hunger not to become walking encyclopedias of religious information.*

The people of God daily hunger for the external Word to come to them from the outside, telling them that they are sinners and telling them they are saved. And they hunger for this, too—not to become walking encyclopedias of religious information, but to take up into an actual life even the smallest part of what they know.

### Appropriation and Application

Let's distinguish *appropriation* and *application*.

Appropriation is about people not only having the truth, but being *had* by it. It is about taking to heart the things of God so as to be

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renewed and transformed by them. We want people to see some essential piece of divine revelation more clearly than when they first walked in the door. We would have them delight in some aspect of the grace of God as it is revealed in Jesus—the glory of his self-sacrifice and his astonishing resurrection. Appropriation grabs hold of the big facts and celebrates those two words Martin Luther held dear: *For you*.

Application depends entirely on appropriation. The "Now what?" follows on the heels of the "So what?" and draws on its strength. Application is about our changed situation—how life can now be lived, now that Christ is revealed to our hearts again by Word and Sacrament. Whether we include explicit directives for life depends on the *telos* of our text. If we say with John, "Little children, love one another," but are a little short on the details, it is to leave intact the marvelous freedom of the Christian "to do or not do" (Luther).

### An example

*As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him (Psalm 103:13).*

I was disciplining one of my daughters in her bedroom. Her spirit was a fist balled up. She was seeing a side of me she hadn't seen before. I became gradually harsher, needing only to see some glimmer of sorrow over her sin.

I broke her. Contrition poured out in a wail: "I'm sorry! I can't help it!"

Now I broke, too. I know a thing or two about that. Now everything changes.

“O, sweetheart...” I say and crush her to my chest, searching for words and taking my time, all to overwhelm her with God’s love and with mine.

I talked about this with my grown daughters the other day (to get permission to share). They didn’t remember the episode and demanded to know which of them was in the story. I’m not telling.

I talked to them about how a father’s heart goes out to a child, how it bursts from his chest. How he rushes to her side, chasing all the space away. It happened from the time they were little. It happened at first words and first steps, at sporting events and musical performances, at graduations and weddings, at times my God let them shine. But, as I tried to put into words, none of that can touch that day in my little girl’s bedroom.

Do you think you understand how a father runs to his child in her struggle against sin? How he is with her? How he is for her and on her side in the fight against this thing she hates? She has gotten to him. She is his. He is hers.

Let’s be in no hurry to move on. In *your* struggle with sin, think about this with me. Think about how a father loves a child.

You live all these decades in a room called grace only to discover that one of the walls is an accordion door. You push it back to discover there is more yet than you had seen. What is it like to be reconciled to God? What have I yet to grasp about this relationship, this love—how wide, how long, how high, how deep? I find that the furniture in my mind is still being rearranged.

*“As a father has compassion on his children.”*

This is application. We search out the implications of salvation—what it has to do with me and what can be different about today.

## What do you notice?

You notice that what we are discussing takes time. If it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing well.



You notice that my example is heavy on appropriation. It leaves the application mostly unstated. It wouldn’t need to be so. Application of the phrase “those who fear him” would fit nicely in my exposition of the text earlier in the sermon. But I take the accent here to be on something we are supposed to know in our bones about the sort of compassion God-fearers will always find in God.

Notice that this example has a modest goal. This is not “the whole counsel of God” packed into one sermon. I am not trying to do everything. Rather, I have concerned myself with a single thought that a child can know. You learn that to speak with understanding the first two words of the Lord’s Prayer is not so modest a goal after all.

Finally, the example above happens to blend illustration with application (a term that includes appropriation in its broad sense). Those components of preaching play well together, especially if I mean to go beyond conveying the information packed into that single verse, “As a father has compassion on his children,” costly as it is. I am taking pains to close the loop. Everything this magnificent psalm has ever meant—to its original hearers and all those across time—it means *for you*.

## Appropriation in particular

One of the axioms of education is to take people from the *known* to the *unknown*. You understand the periodic table in basic chemistry? Good. Let’s see what happens when these elements combine.

Now think about taking people from the *appropriated* to the *unappropriated*. We address people who prize the death and resurrection of Jesus. They don’t doubt that they are reconciled to God. This is good. Why, then, are many of them so anxious? How do you close *that* loop? That’s a good question.

It helps to know our people as well as we can. Audience-centeredness is critical. Take the time to ask good questions, listen well, and reflect deeply on what you’ve heard. Perhaps recycled sermons fall flat not because they were poorly written but because we had entirely different faces before us as we wrote them.

Might we ever be content with appropriation alone and have no application at all? I think so.

The people you preach to are living lives no one has ever lived before or will again, with their particular gifts, confronted by the particular obligations of their vocations and the needs of their particular neighbors. This goes to the freedom of the Christian to look around, and in the peace of forgiveness, to do “whatever comes into their minds to do” (Luther).

A colleague has said that “the law is no puppy that only does what you want it to do.” I may intend by the imperatives and cohorta-

*The third use of the law slides so easily into the first. The voice of conscience wakes up as cruel as ever.*

tives in my sermon to guide the grateful lives of people. “How can you express this thankfulness you feel, this wonder at so great a Savior? Here’s how.” But as we know, “*lex semper accusat*” (the law always accuses). The third use of the law slides so easily into the first. The voice of conscience wakes up as cruel as ever, though it was never our intention to leave people there.

With clarity about what the gospel alone does for people and what the law never can, I sometimes elect to emphasize appropriation and take care not to overwrite my applications. This I do to cultivate gospel predominance as C. F. W. Walther taught us.

Good Friday is one day I want “It is finished” to echo through every world there is and ring in every ear. Let this and only this carry them out the door. Not, “I’ve really got to do better!” Not, “I had better get my act together.” Just, “It is finished!”

This is about so much more than sinning less, to put it bluntly. The death and resurrection of Jesus into which we are baptized remains a matter of perpetual appropriation as we learn to daily die and rise with Jesus.

## Application in particular

Sermon application takes careful thought.

Until the eternal gospel of our Lord is heard above the sound of a nagging conscience and the complaints of offended reason, we cannot ask in the right way what God would have us do. We risk either tying on burdens or waking up the pharisee if our applications are not built on a robust presentation of law and gospel.

*I want my applications to be “aha moments.”*

I want my applications to be “aha moments.” In the spirit of the law, we sweat and strain to produce the qualities of heart we know should be there—we should be more compassionate, more patient, more fearless. Good luck with that. Think instead of the good things that come to us simply because we see. Think of the fruit that grow spontaneously on our branches simply because we have taken in the person and work of our Savior with clearer sight. “*In view of God’s mercy, offer your bodies as a living sacrifice*” (Romans 12:1).

“In view of God’s mercy.” Aha!

And I hope that deeply rooted Christian optimism characterizes our applications.

When I preached Romans 12 not long ago—“Love must be sincere...” —I told a story of my best friend in high school. During a midnight heart-to-heart he confessed, “I don’t know if I’ve ever really loved anyone.” Next I looked into the faces of hundreds of college students and asked, “Do we love each other? I mean it. Do we?” I let the question hang in the air for some time. (Good things happen in the pauses, don’t you agree?) Students told



me they talked about that all through lunch. They didn’t know what I would say next, and they wondered, “How could we not have known?”

Yes, we love.

*Students told me they talked about that all through lunch.*

In my message, I reminisced about the quality of the friendship that tenth grader offered me—it still takes my breath away. No, we do not love to our own satisfaction. We are not love’s definition. You don’t look at the likes of us to know what love is. But we do, indeed, love because God, in Christ, loved us first. We love because Jesus did not fail in his quest, not only to rescue us in every way a person can be rescued, but also to teach us brotherly love and to create a people eager to do what is good.

“And in fact, you do love all of God’s family.... Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, *to do so more and more*” (1 Thessalonians 4:10). This is how we talk to the bride of Christ.

Given everything we are led to understand about this sinful flesh of ours, as good theology teaches us to call things as they are—given what we are led to expect of fallen people in a fallen world—is it not a wonder when God’s people love? What a few words and a little bit of water can do!

It goes to a question I often raise with my students: how does one properly speak to the bride of Christ? We can preach the law to powerful effect without needing to say things to the Church that are simply not true. For example, her works done in faith are *not* the “filthy rags” Isaiah spoke about. There are lifelong believers who think that! How refreshing it will be for them to find out that the smallest act of Christian love is the Lord Christ celebrating his victory over sin, death, and devil. The moment came from him, as did the impulse, and the strength. These acts are his even as they are ours, and in them, in grace, he positively delights.

Aha!



There is more we can teach our people as we depict the life of freedom that busts out in good works. For example, I love the picture a brother has offered: a father holds the hand of a toddler as she takes her first steps. She cannot walk a single step apart from his grip on her. But don't think she is not the one doing the walking. Just watch those little feet go. Now take a look at his face—how a father loves a child.

Just look at his face as the people of God, his masks, offer up their holy vocations in service to their neighbor—a subject we will never tire of, nor will they. There's an aha moment in the thought that my sanctification is for the people who experience me, those whom God wants loved.

Lastly, when we understand that we are nothing without Christ and can do nothing without him, our references in preaching to the means of grace will not be obligatory. We know no other way of sermonizing than that, in our applications, we perpetually call our people to remain in Christ. How? We drag ourselves in our poor half-heartedness to Word and sacrament in hopeful expectation of being wakened and warmed. We let the Word of Christ live richly within us, as God gives us the strength.

"Thinking must be turned a new direction; Christ must *be thought* of if you are to say Christ lives in you" (Luther).

## The *habitus practicus*

In the twin arts of appropriation and application, our own credibility is implicated. By the earnestness of our appropriations and the realism of our applications, we demonstrate that we know what we are talking about. We show that we "share in human stuff" with the people in the pew. The pulpit is not our private

confessional, but they can tell that we know something about living as sinner and saint in this actual world of simple pleasures and broken shoestrings—that our preaching is an extension of our very lives.

It will be obvious at the end of our lives that we did not become who we so badly wanted to become. Instead, we learned to never let the cross out of our sight. That cross is dear and what we learn through *tentatio* and *Anfechtung* (trial and struggle) we will teach to others and call it all blessed. Luther: "For as soon as God's Word becomes known through you, the devil will inflict you, will make a real theologian of you."

There is no escaping the struggle of Christian living. Instead, there is the promise of Jesus to meet us there by his Word. We display to our people what we have learned in the Spirit's school: that God allows us to be battered by devil, world, and flesh so as to learn to hang on for dear life to the gospel. In the end, we wage everything on Jesus.

To grow in "the practical habit of the theologian" is not only the task of the pastor. He will urge on his people that gaining the knowledge of Christ is a way of life. It happens, for example, when some in the body of Christ are offended by others and are making motions of leaving. You plead, "The first time someone hurts you, you want to leave? Really? You will miss it. *Now* is when theology becomes life. *Now* is when we find out what all this has been about from the start, when you forgive freely from the heart for Jesus sake." This is application.

*God allows us to be battered by devil, world, and flesh so as to learn to hang on for dear life to the gospel.*

We are not drill sergeants whipping cadets into shape. We are pastors seeing to the care of souls. They are not "brains on sticks" (James K. A. Smith), empty receptacles in which to pour Bible trivia (if there is such a thing). In a nod to C. S. Lewis (*The Abolition of Man*), they are people "with chests," capable, in Christ, of responding to Christian truth in whole-hearted Christian living.

Their capability *is* Christ. By the Spirit, his every gospel imperative—to trust and not be troubled, to hope and be glad—will ring true in them.

What a pleasure to guide God's people in what it means to linger and live in God's thought—how a father loves a child.

<sup>1</sup> From *The Parables of Kierkegaard*.