

8 Questions to Help You Understand and Apply the Bible

OCTOBER 11, 2017 — [MATTHEW HARMON](#)



Sometimes the most important things in the Christian life can be the most difficult.

That can certainly be true of understanding and applying the Bible.

As believers we know that reading Scripture is essential to following Jesus. But if we’re honest, we often find it difficult to understand and apply. The Bible talks about so many different things; how do we know what to focus on? It’s set in a world very different from ours; how do we apply it to our lives today?

One simple and effective tool is asking good questions. The questions we ask when we read the Bible largely determine how we understand and apply the Bible. So we need to make sure we are asking the right questions, the kind of questions the Bible was designed to answer. But how do we know what those questions are?

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The Bible is first and foremost a story about God displaying his glory through creating and redeeming humans. It makes sense, then, that the Bible is designed to answer questions connected to this central theme. Jesus confirms this dual focus on God and humanity. When asked what the greatest commandment is, he replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” ([Matt 22:37](#)). But Jesus wasn’t done. He continued, “And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” ([Matt 22:39](#)). Love God. Love others. This is the heart of what God wants from his people.

Based on this foundation, there are four questions for *understanding* any passage, and four questions for *applying* any passage.

Four Questions for Interpretation

1. What do I learn about God?

God is the main character of the Bible, so he should be our starting point. Every passage of Scripture reveals something about God, even if he’s not specifically mentioned. Look for his character ([Rev. 4:8](#)), his conduct ([Ps. 23:1–6](#)), and his concerns ([Exod. 22:21–22](#)). Also pay attention to all three persons of the Trinity ([Matt. 28:18–20](#); [2 Cor. 13:14](#)).

2. What do I learn about people?

As the pinnacle of God’s creation, humans are at the center of his purposes. Think through what the passage reveals about our identity as divine image-bearers ([Eccl. 3:11](#)). Look for the fallen condition—the sinful beliefs, attitudes, feelings, actions, or tendencies mentioned or implied in the text ([Prov. 6:16–19](#)). Consider what the passage reveals about living as those who’ve been redeemed through the work of Christ ([Rom. 12:9–13](#)).

3. What do I learn about relating to God?

Loving God with our whole being expresses itself in a variety of ways. Start by looking for reasons to praise God ([1 Pet. 1:3–5](#)). Consider what sin you need to confess and repent of ([1 John 1:5–10](#)). Identify any promises God calls us to believe ([1 Pet. 2:4–12](#)).

4. What do I learn about relating to others?

God created us to be in community with one another. When he saves us from our sins, he makes us part of the body of Christ. Start by considering what the passage shows about interacting with others—family, friends, roommates, coworkers, classmates, neighbors, fellow believers, non-Christians, etc. (Eph. 4:25–5:2). Look for what the passage teaches about pursuing reconciliation with others (Rom. 12:18). Reflect on what the passage teaches about loving, serving, and caring well for others (Luke 10:25–37).

Based on that foundation, we can then ask four simple questions to help us apply the passage to our lives.

Four Questions for Application

When it comes to applying the Bible, we tend to gravitate toward what we should *do* in response. But since the goal of reading the Bible is being transformed into the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:20–24), we must ask a set of questions that lead to more holistic application.

1. What does God want me to understand/think?

God has given us the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16), but we are still tempted to think the way we did before we knew Christ (Eph. 4:17–19). Deep and lasting transformation begins with the renewal of our minds (Rom. 12:1–2). Reflect on any wrong ways of thinking that the passage exposes.

2. What does God want me to believe?

We may understand a truth at an intellectual level without letting it shape how we live. Jesus makes this distinction in the parable of the soils; those who initially receive God’s Word with joy but have no root will subsequently fall away from the gospel, since they fail to “hold it fast in an honest and good heart” (Luke 8:15). Consider what false beliefs the passage reveals and what gospel promises you need to believe.

3. What does God want me to desire?

This question targets the affections—the combination of desires, inclinations, feelings, and will that are the spring of our actions. God calls us to desire him above all else (Ps. 42:1–2), but apart from the work of the gospel we will desire what’s evil (Prov. 24:1–2). Reflect on how you see the sinful desires mentioned or implied in the passage show up in your own life, as well as the kind of godly desires you should be cultivating.

4. What does God want me to do?

When God’s Word changes how we think, what we functionally believe, and what we desire, it will produce tangible change in what we do and don’t do. Sometimes a passage gives us direct commands ([Rom. 12:9–17](#)). But many are far less straightforward, requiring us to think carefully about specific actions in light of our current place in redemptive history. Think through what sinful actions the passage exposes in your own life as well as what godly actions you should pursue.

Armed with these eight questions, we put ourselves in a position where God’s Spirit can take God’s Word to transform us into the image of God’s Son. Why not open your Bible and try them today?

Editors’ note: For more on this topic, see Matthew Harmon’s new book, *[Asking the Right Questions: A Practical Guide to Understanding and Applying the Bible](#)* (Crossway, 2017).



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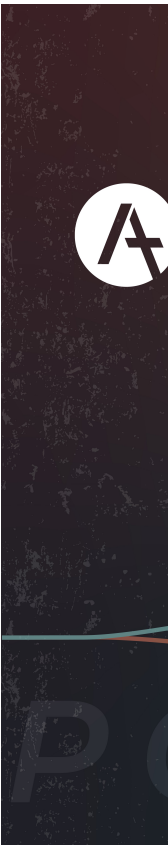


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How I Became a Sunday Drug Abuser

OCTOBER 10, 2017 — [STEVE HOPPE](#)



Three Xanax. Three Propranolol. Three Zoloft.

This was the prescription-pill combination I took before my first sermon as a pastor in New York City.

Xanax—an anti-anxiety medication—calmed my nerves in a way similar to alcohol, minus the motor-skill impairment. Propranolol—a beta-blocker—slowed my heart rate so I wouldn’t get flushed or sweat profusely. Zoloft—an antidepressant—was a medication I’d been taking for 10 years to keep my unpredictable anxiety in check.

After meeting with my psychiatrist earlier that week and sharing my fear of a panic attack in the pulpit, she gave me the Xanax and Propranolol prescriptions in addition to my normal Zoloft refill. She said I could take one of each before the big sermon. One Xanax. One Propranolol. One Zoloft. Three pills. That’s it.

Instead I took nine.

Why? Why did I triple my dosage that day?

Simple: Idolatry.

The idol? My congregation. I worshiped the people in the pews. The seats were packed with high-profile investment bankers, Broadway actresses, university professors, runway models—you name it.

To me, everybody in the sanctuary was impressive. And I *needed* to impress them. I needed their approval, affirmation, and acceptance. I needed them to love me. And I mean *love* me. I needed to floor them with a level of oratory excellence they’d never experienced before. And I convinced myself the more pills I took, the likelier this would happen.

So I did something I would never recommend . . . something I deeply regret . . . something that could have killed me. I tripled my dosage. I stood up in the pulpit—high as a kite—and preached to my gods.

I may as well have been bowing down to them.

As church leaders, why is it so easy to worship the approval of our congregations? Two reasons: Pastors like people, and they exhibit a tendency toward spiritual politicking.

We Like People

One of the reasons I became a pastor was my affinity for people. I like thought-provoking conversations. I like walking alongside people going through difficult trials. I like serving and socializing with fellow Christians. I like spending time with people with no agenda at all. I suspect I’m not alone here. Most church leaders—lay and professional—like people.

The problem? When we like people, we want them to like us back. And if not kept in check, the desire to be liked back can turn into a *need*, and we fall apart without it. At that point, it’s become a golden calf. A natural affection for people has slid down the slippery slope from good to god.

Spiritual Politicians

Church leaders—specifically paid church leaders—are also so prone to worship human approval because our job security is intricately tied to it. If our congregations love us, our jobs are secure. If not, we may be on our way out. It’s not altogether different from politics. This creates an environment where human approval is critical to professional survival, and yet we can’t want it *too* much. We need it, but we can’t *need* it. This is a challenging dynamic to navigate. Few leaders do it well. I certainly don’t.

What are the consequences when we idolize our sheep’s approval? Here are three:

1. We stop loving them.

Three things are inevitable in life—death, taxes, and human disapproval. We will *never* receive 100 percent approval ratings from our congregants—and if we do, we’re probably doing something wrong. When our disciples inevitably criticize us as we worship their approval, it will lead us to do one of two things. We’ll either *demonize them* in our hearts—a coping mechanism to make us not *want* their approval. Or we’ll *avoid them*—a coping mechanism that allows us to move forward by pretending they don’t exist.

And neither approach—demonization or avoidance—involves love.

2. We become awful ministers.

Jesus said we cannot worship both God and money (Matt. 6: 24). Replace money with human approval. When we idolize human approval, our vertical connection is short-circuited and ministry becomes a mere horizontal activity. Our sermons become Spirit-less speeches. Our counsel consists of trite platitudes. We’re afraid to rebuke those in sin. God is on mute, and our ministries suffer.

3. We will burn out.

I have a confession to make—one a bit less dramatic than my opening confession about my pharmaceutical abuse. When I pastored in New York City, I would spend 40 to 50 hours preparing my sermons. That was the magic number I needed to make them *perfect*—to ensure every sentence was exactly what I wanted. I would rehearse them 20 to 30 times until every catchy phrase, strategic pause, and emphatic hand gesture was down pat. Why? The same reason I took the extra pills that day. I wanted to impress.

The result of this overpreparation? Not only did I sound inappropriately rehearsed and overly polished, but I burnt out. I couldn’t sustain the energy and time requirements necessary to craft and deliver A+ sermons. Had I not repented of the human-approval idol that drove me to overprepare, I’d likely be out of ministry today.

Good News

All of us in ministry will be tempted to worship congregational approval. Most of us will give in to the temptation at some point.

But is there good news we can cling to as we battle the temptation to worship our sheep? Absolutely. Here are three liberating truths:

1. Less is more.

You can relax. The more you try to impress your people, the less you will. That’s the nature of human dynamics—we’re impressed most by those who aren’t trying to impress us. In fact, I’ll take it a step further. You can be *weak*. You can show brokenness, confess sin, and admit failure. Trust me, people will like you more when you do. Humility is attractive.

2. You are forgiven.

If you’ve worshiped your congregation’s approval—and all leaders have—Jesus offers forgiveness. No guilt. No shame. No condemnation. He wipes away your idolatry as far as the east is from the west ([Ps. 103:12](#)). So confess your idolatry, repent, and rest in the beauty of Christ’s atoning death. You’re forgiven.

3. You are loved.

You can stop worshiping human approval because you have all the approval and love you’ll ever need. In whom? In Christ of course.

It’s a love that doesn’t depend on the quality of your sermons, podcasts, Bible studies, or blog posts. It pushes aside your blown evangelism attempts and boring Sunday school lessons. It overlooks your homiletical missteps, unwise counsel, and poor leadership. It soaks deeply into your heart and enables you to listen to harsh criticism without crumbling. It’s unbiased, unconditional, and unmatched. It cost God everything but costs you nothing.

It’s a love you certainly can’t get by popping pills.

Editors’ note: [Watch the trailer](#) for Steve Hoppe’s new book, *[Sipping Saltwater: How to Find Lasting Satisfaction in a World of Thirst](#)* (The Good Book Company, 2017).



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