

How Does the Bible Direct Us?

Consider the foundation we've methodically laid thus far in our study. The goal has been to start at basic "ground-level" and gradually build, one layer of understanding upon another.

- ▶ The Bible is the world's most precious book.
- ▶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for those who invest in it.
- ▶ The old law of Moses served a vital role in God's eternal plan, but on this historical side of the cross, we live under the scope of the new covenant of Jesus Christ.
- ▶ There are two ultimate sources of authority—heavenly and human. As we handle the New Testament, we're interacting with heavenly authority.
- ▶ Based on my ongoing interaction with this heavenly authority, I will function either on the side of "law" or "lawlessness." I'm encouraged by the Spirit of God to speak and to act as one who will be "judged under the law of liberty" (James 2.12).
- ▶ There are differing categories of Biblical communication whose context must be appreciated if we are to "accurately handle the word of truth" (2 Tim 2.15).

But how, practically speaking, does the Bible direct us? In real-life terms, how do we transition from reading God-breathed words on the printed pages of our Bibles to leading God-approved lives in our own modern context? How can I faithfully interpret his communication to mankind that was delivered thousands of years ago and faithfully apply it to my own individual life? How does God speak to *me* and direct *me* at this point in history? Consider six "connective paths" between the Word of God and the human heart.

Straightforward Declarations of Truth

There are hundreds, if not thousands of straightforward, direct, to-the-point statements throughout both the Old and New Testaments. They are candidly delivered truths from divinely-appointed spokesmen, Spirit-led writers, or, at times, even from the very mouth of God himself. From the eternal mind of the infinite Creator, these matter-of-fact statements of truth are communicated to finite, temporal human beings so that we, as image-bearers of God, might believe and act upon his will for our lives. Examples of this "connective path" between the Word of God and the human heart abound.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. (Gen 1.1)

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isa 55.8-9)

For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil. (Eccl 12.14)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1.1, 14)

I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." (Rom 1.16-17)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. (Eph 1.3-6)

He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." (Rev 22.20)

Regardless of my reaction, these are straightforward declarations of truth from the Creator of the universe to humanity. I can hear them, believe them, and act upon them or not, but my ignorance of or chafing under or rebelling against these God-breathed truths will not change the fact that they are true. God has seen fit to define reality for all mankind in a written revelation. As a part of that revelation, he makes many straightforward declarations of truth.

Overarching Principles

A *principle* is a general law or basic truth from which further elements of instruction or expectation are derived. Principles provide a guiding sense of requirement and obligation. They serve as the groundwork of a system, an essential part of a whole. Jesus' words in Matthew 6.22-24 are just a few of the many principles we find in the New Testament. Like foundational building blocks, they support the superstructure of Christian living.

"The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."

There's a difference between, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" and, "You cannot serve God and money." The former is a straightforward declaration of truth; the latter is an overarching principle. It's not a specific command or an explicit example, but it *is* an overarching principle. Regardless of my geographical, historical or cultural context, the overarching principle holds true—I cannot simultaneously serve God and money.

Or consider another example from Matthew 10.37-42.

“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

“Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.”

Strictly speaking, there is no “command” in these words of Jesus. And yet, there are several overarching principles that all disciples of Christ must respect. My relationship with Jesus takes precedent over any and all earthly relationships. I must die to self and live for him. The disciple who selflessly shows compassion to others will be rewarded by the Lord.

Or consider the admonition of Paul in 2 Corinthians 9.6-7.

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

With these two sentences, Paul delivered so much more than a command to give. The Spirit of God, through Paul, established an overarching principle for God’s people. Whether I’m a Jew or a Gentile, when I give of my resources, I’m to give from the heart. Whether I’m a man or a woman, if I adhere to the command to give, but do so with a selfishly reluctant and grudging heart, I haven’t met the Lord’s expectations for my life. Why? Because there are overarching principles that apply to my life as a created, redeemed child of God. Regardless of the geographical, historical or cultural context, God loves a *cheerful* giver.

Overarching principles with divine implications for human application are all over the New Testament. From the description of the church as a body with many members (1 Cor 12.12-31) to the more excellent way of love (1 Cor 13), from the armor of God (Eph 6.10-20) to Paul’s illustrations of soldiers, athletes, and farmers (2 Tim 2.4-7), God deepens our understanding of his will via the connective path of overarching principles.

Affirmative Commands

In Luke 6.46, Jesus asked, “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” Walking with Christ involves avoiding that which is evil (more on that in a moment), but also actively doing and involving myself in that which is good. If the Son of God or one of his commissioned envoys tells me to do something, I must do it! I am under the jurisdiction of the One who has “all authority in heaven and on earth.” His inspired messengers—whose God-directed work I have in the form of the New Testament—were authoritatively instructed to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and

of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt 28.18-20). They said things like, “If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord” (1 Cor 14.37). Many of those commands were to affirmatively *do* something. Consider the positive commands in Romans 12.

- ▶ Let love be genuine (12.9)
- ▶ Abhor what is evil (12.9)
- ▶ Hold fast to what is good (12.9)
- ▶ Love one another with brotherly affection (12.10)
- ▶ Outdo one another in showing honor (12.10)
- ▶ Be fervent in spirit (12.11)
- ▶ Serve the Lord (12.11)
- ▶ Rejoice in hope (12.12)
- ▶ Be patient in tribulation (12.12)
- ▶ Be constant in prayer (12.12)
- ▶ Contribute to the needs of the saints (12.13)
- ▶ Seek to show hospitality (12.13)
- ▶ Bless those who persecute you (12.14)
- ▶ Rejoice with those who rejoice (12.15)
- ▶ Weep with those who weep (12.15)
- ▶ Live in harmony with one another (12.16)
- ▶ Associate with the lowly (12.16)
- ▶ Give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all (12.17)
- ▶ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all (12.18)
- ▶ If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink (12.20)
- ▶ Overcome evil with good (12.21)

The very first gospel invitation was founded on an affirmative command—“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2.38). The examples are all over the New Testament. One of the methods God uses to communicate his will for our lives is affirmative commands.

Negative Prohibitions

On the other hand, just as God has clearly told us to *do* some things, he has authoritatively *prohibited* us from doing other things. Returning to the same context of Romans 12:

- ▶ Do not be slothful in zeal (12.11)
- ▶ Do not curse those who persecute you (12.14)
- ▶ Do not be haughty (12.16)
- ▶ Never be wise in your own sight (12.16)
- ▶ Repay no one evil for evil (12.17)
- ▶ Never avenge yourselves (12.19)
- ▶ Do not be overcome by evil (12.21)

As our Father in heaven who is good and does good (Psa 119.68), he is seeking to mold us and discipline us *for* our good.

For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but **he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.** For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. (Heb 12.7-11)

Our responsibility, “as obedient children,” is to avoid conformity “to the passions” of our “former ignorance, “but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (1 Pet 1.14-16). Our heavenly Father defines and describes and warns against that which is unholy via the connective path of negative prohibitions.

Positive and Negative Examples

Jesus Christ commissioned his apostles with authority. He drew lines in the sand when he said things like, “The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me” (Luke 10.16). It is on that foundation that the apostle Paul would call attention to his own example.

I urge you, then, **be imitators of me.** That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, **as I teach them everywhere in every church.** (1 Cor 4.16-17)

What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—**practice these things,** and the God of peace will be with you. (Phil 4.9)

Follow **the pattern of the sound words** that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. (2 Tim 1.13)
You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and **what you have heard from me** in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. (2 Tim 2.1-2)

Under the guidance of the specifically-commissioned apostles, the people of God in the New Testament lived and interacted and worked and worshiped together. They put into personal practice what they heard and saw in the apostles, much of which is recorded for us in the book of Acts and the various epistles. As a result, we can study historical examples of people who pleased God under the guidance of the Spirit-led ambassadors of Jesus. What did they do? How did they do it? In what ways did they handle adversity and prosperity? The principle behind Romans 15.4 holds true for us in this case. “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

Undoubtedly, there are many examples preserved in the Bible that did not meet with God's approval. They are recorded—"warts and all"—for our learning and fearful avoidance.

A man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife's knowledge, he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 5.1-2)

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. (Gal 2.11)

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. (1 Cor 5.1-2)

The attitudes and actions that were commended and encouraged by the original handpicked representatives of Jesus should be imitated by modern disciples of Christ. Those attitudes and actions that were condemned and prohibited by those Spirit-guided messengers should be warned against and avoided. The ancient examples of others serve as a vital connective path between God's will and modern discipleship.

Necessary Inferences

From the earliest of ages, we instinctively accumulate evidence based on instructions, examples and circumstances, and learn to make decisions and judgments. At times, decisions must be made and actions must be taken in the absence of an express command or specific example. In such cases, we use the power of logical deduction. "Based on the data I have, what's the most natural conclusion to be drawn?" The same holds for the Bible. Consider Acts 8.38.

And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.

Who baptized whom? We naturally infer from the language and context of Acts 8 that Philip baptized the eunuch rather than vice versa, even though the names are not specifically given.

Or consider the same principle intentionally employed by Paul to make a specific point.

For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" (Rom 10.11-15)

Notice that Paul encourages his readers to remember the simple principle first established in Joel 2.32—everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. From there, he makes a series of necessary inferences in order to reinforce the importance of disciples preaching and supporting the preaching of the gospel.

- ▶ If people must call on the name of the Lord to be saved, we can necessarily infer that they *must* believe in him.
- ▶ If people are to believe in the Lord, we can necessarily infer that they *must* hear of him.
- ▶ If people are to hear of the Lord, someone *must* make a proclamation of him.
- ▶ “And how are they to preach unless they are sent?”

The writer of Hebrews relied heavily on necessary inferences to establish and repeatedly emphasize that the new covenant is “better” than the old. In fact, one of the great themes of Hebrews is that the old covenant taught by necessary inference that the new would be better.

In Mark 12.26-27, Jesus used the power of necessary inference to prove that those who have died continue to exist and will, in fact, be raised from the dead.

“And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong.”

Of course, it’s important to mention that we must always honestly and consistently remind ourselves that not all inferences are necessary. Not all conclusions are inescapable. For example, some have used the accounts of Lydia, the Philippian jailer, and their households in Acts 16 as Scriptural authorization for the baptism of infants. Lydia was baptized, she “and her household” (16.15). The jailer was baptized at once, “he and all his family” (16.33). But to leap from those historical examples to Scriptural precedence for infant baptism is to infer that which is not necessary. There are many households without infants. As we connect the dots between the Scriptures and God’s authoritative will for our lives, we must make sure that our conclusions are resting on solid ground.

The Lord’s Supper as a Case Study

No single passage of Scripture gives us every relevant detail regarding the observance of the Lord’s Supper on the first day of every week. But as we familiarize ourselves with everything God’s word has to say on the subject, a well-developed pattern begins to emerge.

- ▶ In 1 Corinthians 11.23-25, Paul delivers a **straightforward declaration of God-breathed truth**.

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

- ▶ In 1 Corinthians 11.26, we find an **overarching principle**.

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

- ▶ In 1 Corinthians 11.33-34, Paul conveys an **affirmative command**.

So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another—if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment.

- ▶ 1 Corinthians 11.20-22, carries the weight of **negative prohibition**.

When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

- ▶ As to when this memorial was observed, Acts 20.7 provides an **approved example** from a historical account involving an inspired apostle.

On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight.

- ▶ From the days of Moses, God's people had been making a **necessary inference** as to the frequency of special observances. The Israelites understood that the command to "Remember the Sabbath day" (Exo 20.8) necessarily inferred a specific observance every seven days. If their observance was to be yearly, the month and the day were given (the Day of Atonement, Lev 23.27). If their observance was to be monthly, the day of the month was given (the blowing of silver trumpets, Num 10.10). If their observance was to be weekly, the day of the week was given (the seventh day, Exo 20.8-11). The New Testament proceeds according to the same local pattern in passages like Acts 20.7 above and 1 Corinthians 16.1-2 below.

Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.

Conclusion

We began this section of our study by asking some simple questions. How, practically speaking, does the Bible direct us? In real-life terms, how do we transition from reading God-breathed words on the printed pages of our Bibles to leading God-approved lives in our own modern context? Throughout the New Testament of Jesus Christ, we find six connective paths between the Word of God and the human heart.

- ▶ Straightforward declarations of truth
- ▶ Overarching principles
- ▶ Affirmative commands
- ▶ Negative prohibitions
- ▶ Positive and negative examples
- ▶ Necessary inferences

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth. (2 Tim 2.15, NASB)

Questions for Growth and Discussion

1. List two or three examples of a **straightforward declaration of truth** in Scripture.
2. List two or three examples of an **overarching principle** in Scripture.
3. List two or three examples of **affirmative commands** in Scripture.
4. List two or three examples of **negative prohibitions** in Scripture.
5. List two or three examples of **positive examples** in Scripture.
6. List two or three examples of **negative examples** in Scripture.
7. List two or three examples where **inference is necessary** in Scripture.
8. Take the time to read Luke's historical account of the controversy over circumcision in Acts 15. Volatile questions swirled around the life of the early church as to whether Gentile Christians had to be circumcised in order to be pleasing to God (15.5). Using the text of Acts 15, can you find an instance where each of the six connective paths mentioned in this study were employed to discover and clarify God's will?

* A straightforward declaration of truth -

* An overarching principle -

* Affirmative commands -

* Negative prohibitions -

* An approved example -

* A necessary inference -