

Chapter 2.

Rule #2: Study Your Bible Systematically

“Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” (Matthew 4:4, NIV)

Chapter 4 of the Gospel of Matthew tells how Jesus was tempted by Satan three different times. Each time Jesus responded not by saying, “Go away” nor by saying “don’t you know who I am?” or anything of that nature. He responded by quoting the Bible. After each response, Satan never followed up with the same temptation, but tried something different. By the third time, Satan simply fled. In the particular passage written above Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 8:3. It is a principal for Christians to follow. It says that we are not to live our lives on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. Every word would mean of course, every single word. In order to know what every single word is, that would require us to somehow learn what those words are. For those of us with access to a bible, that means reading. To those without access to a bible, that would mean readily hearing the Bible preached. To any American, there is no excuse as the Bible is made readily available and is given away free at many churches just for the asking. God holds us accountable based on the information given to us.

The focus of this book is not on “why” you should read your bible, but on how to read your bible. If you believe Jesus is God, and Jesus is telling you that we should live by every word that comes from the mouth of God, well, that should be enough of a why to not ask any more questions. If you don’t believe Jesus is God, you have much bigger problems then whether or not you should read your whole bible on a regular basis. Since Jesus is giving this marching order, the next question becomes how does one read their entire bible? At what pace or speed should one learn “every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God?” The answer leads us to Rule #2: “Read Your Bible Systematically”.

Reading your bible requires some sort of self-discipline. That term sounds ugly to many of our ears, but consider the following. Brushing your teeth requires self-discipline. You can choose at any time to brush or not brush your teeth. You will not die if you don’t brush your teeth. Bathing requires self-discipline. You will not die if you don’t bath, but it will probably affect your popularity.

I was thinking of calling this chapter “Read Your Bible Habitually”, but I felt that title misses the point. I do encourage you to read the Bible as a daily habit, and we’ll discuss that idea in this chapter. I specifically choose the word “systematically” for this chapter. This book focuses on “how” you should read your bible and not why you should read your bible. The word and concept of “systemically” focuses on the “how” one should read your bible. Are you confused? Good, then let’s move on and I will explain it further.

One of the most important principals to understand about the Bible is that it is a collection of individual books written over a long period of time, but they are designed to be read as a single unit. Think of a team sport or a group of musicians. The individual athletes or individual musicians each have their special talents. When you put those in individuals together, there is

something special about the combination. The whole unit becomes greater than the sum of its parts. Most of us have seen a great athletic team or a group of musicians that plays well together. That word picture can also be used to describe the Bible. The books that compose the Bible are designed to work as a team. Each individual book has special purposes and meaning, but the ideas and concepts are consistent throughout the whole book.

Jesus made a point about studying the Old Testament that I want to address:

Jesus said, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me,"
(John 5:39, NIV)

When Jesus spoke those words, he was talking specifically about all the books of the Old Testament. He was saying to the audience in effect "You guys study the Old Testament diligently and know it backwards. You think you are going to heaven because you can quote it forwards and backwards. What you fail to realize is that they speak about me (Jesus)". The point is that Jesus was teaching that one needs to read the Old Testament in the perspective of the New Testament. As a Christian, there is a lot we can learn about Jesus in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament. That isn't the only reason to read the Old Testament, but it is not a bad reason either.

A common expression among bible teachers goes, "The Old Testament is in the New Testament concealed, and the New Testament is in the Old Testament revealed". The point is the Bible is designed to be read as a single unit. The principals about the purpose of Jesus are taught all over the Old Testament. They are explained and revealed in the New Testament. The word-pictures and lessons that are common in the Old Testament are taught as principals in the New Testament. Once you grasp the concept that all the books of the Bible are designed to be understood as a single unit, you are well on your way to understanding your bible.

Let us get back to the rule itself: Study your bible systematically. Because the Bible is designed to be read and studied as a unit, one needs to find a system where one can read the whole book as a unit. The goal is to read the whole bible on a regular basis. For a first time reader a regular basis would be a long time. For a veteran reader, one can read the Bible in less than a year. I am not here to push any specific type of system. What I truly desire is for you the reader to find a system that you feel comfortable with and stick to that system until you have worked your way through the entire bible. There should never be any pressure to read your bible over say, a one-year period. God does not look down from heaven and say, "You're four chapters behind schedule, get going". Nor does God say, "All right John, you're eighteen chapters ahead of last year's pace, keep up the good work". God is interested in us understanding what he wrote. It is not a race to the finish line.

One has to think of bible reading as eating a meal. One can skip a meal or not eat for a day, and still survive. One eats every day for sustenance. Daily bible reading should be a habitual ritual like sitting down to eat a meal. Again, the key to bible reading is to find a system that is right for you. I often suggest for beginners to start with ten to fifteen minutes per day. Others can do a half hour or more. You don't get points with God for how long you read. This is about forming a good habit that can last a lifetime. Like eating rituals, this habit should stay with you

for the rest of your life. You never say at the end of the year, “Well I’ve now eaten all the possible food groups and recipe’s that I enjoy. I never have to eat again.” Yet, some people have that philosophy about the Bible. They think, “Well, I’ve now read it through once, God is happy with me and I can stop.” The Bible is designed to spiritually nourish us all our lives in the same way food is needed to sustain our bodies.

I hate to disappoint all my readers here, but I want you to know that I am not perfect and there are days where I forget to read my bible. I know this may be a shock to you, but it happens. Like missing a meal one can survive by missing one of those rituals, you just won’t be as healthy or energetic by for a while. The same is with the habit of bible reading. You can skip it on bad days, but you simply won’t be as focused on God when you are not. Back in chapter one I gave an illustration of a seventeen year old boy asked to write a report on a good looking seventeen year old girl. The boy does it not out of obligation, but because he thinks she’s the greatest thing on planet earth and wants to know everything there is to know about her. We read our bible out of love because we want to. It was never meant to be an obligation.

I will never say that reading through the entire bible is easy. The first time I worked my way through it I was constantly confused. There are so many names to keep straight and so many rules and regulations that it can be frustrating at times. Here is something to keep in mind that I wish somebody told me when I first read my bible: Don’t obsess on the all the names of the kings and people. It is their stories, their patterns and their lives that God first wants you to comprehend. As you become more familiar with the characters, you will naturally remember the names. I am not saying their names are not important, I am just advising you to not obsess over keeping all of your characters straight. The story line and the principals are the priority over the names. It is like learning about people. We can often recall personality traits and interests about a person better than we can remember their names. The more time we spend with that person, the more likely we are to remember their name.

Lets get back to the principal of learning your bible systematically. Let me give you some suggestions and then you decide which of these, if any are right for you. A popular model is a chart that lays out a 365-day reading plan as to read the entire bible in a year. There are many of these plans available. If you go to any Christian bookstore or even ask a bible teaching pastor, they will have one or know where to get one. Some study bibles will even print them as references in an appendix. This is usually a single page chart with the entire bible broken into 365 pieces, one for every day of the year. The charts vary in strategy and length, but have the same goal. Some suggest a little of the Old and New Testament simultaneously and others have Old Testament readings on odd days and New Testament readings on even days. If you have the discipline to follow these please do. Unfortunately, I find many people treat these like diets or New Year’s resolutions: It is good for a couple of weeks. Let me relieve your guilt right now. My rule is to read your bible systemically, not just in 365 days. If this type of chart works for you, please use it and stick to it. If not, please read it at a pace that you are comfortable with and you know you can stick to that pace. If you are not sure what kind of pace you can handle, break this chart up into a two year or three year period. The point is to regularly and habitually study your bible, and not try to finish in a year.

I would like to give a few tips for first time through the Bible readers. Many people take on the Bible on a straightforward basis. Some people like a straight through the Bible method. If you

can form this habit, please stick to it. For first timers, I often suggest buying a study bible. A study bible has commentary in the footnotes to help you explain difficult passages. Just remember the commentaries are not God-inspired, but the Bible itself is.

Another popular method is the “multiple bookmark” method. I personally like this one. This is where one keeps one bookmark in the Old Testament and another in the New Testament. Every day, you move the bookmark, say a chapter or two. A popular variation of this idea is to keep three bookmarks in the Bible. One for the Old Testament, one for the New Testament and one just for Proverbs and Psalms. Each day read something from each bookmark. The reason for the third bookmark in Proverbs and Psalms is those two books focus on God’s wisdom (Proverbs) and has poetic verses on praising God (Psalms). One would be amazed how often God will show you a principal in the Old Testament reading that relates to something you recently read in the New Testament.

With the multiple bookmark method, you will probably read the New Testament faster than the Old Testament. My personal method usually gets me through the New Testament roughly twice a year and the Old Testament roughly once a year. I don’t keep track of dates. I can’t remember the anniversary of when I last started a complete cycle and I don’t have a goal of on what day I plan on finishing. My goal each day is for God to show me the principals he wants me to comprehend for that day. Some days I can handle more truth than others.

I have met some people who have many bookmarks. They keep four or five or more and read from some each day. To me, that is like trying to watch four of five television shows simultaneously. If you can handle this, my hat is off to you. Remember my goal is to help you find some way to work your way through the entire bible. What is right for one person in this goal is not right for someone else.

Also, remember that the chapter and verse numbers were added centuries after the text was written. They are not part of the original text. They were added to help us find a particular place in the Bible. With that in mind, it is often good to overlap the chapters a little as you read.

The rule of reading your bible systemically is about finding a system that works for you. I believe anyone can find ten to fifteen minutes a day to read your bible. Most people do it first thing in the morning or before they go to bed. The best time is when you are most alert. There is a bible principal that should be taught here:

Jesus taught a principal about giving God priority in your life that I want to address here:

Jesus said, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:13, NIV)

The key word here is “first”. If you give God the first (or best) of your time, be it in prayer or in studying God’s word, I believe he will bless the rest of your day. In context of this verse, Jesus was talking about how people worry about what they should eat, drink and wear. His point is if you seek God first, God will take care of those needs in your life. It doesn’t mean if you read your bible you can lay in bed never make any effort at life and angels will do your shopping for you at no charge. It means God is aware you have need of those things and will guide to satisfy

those needs. The verse says to make God a priority over those needs. With that stated, I believe one should give God your best time of the day. For me, it is first thing in the morning. If you are a night person, spend some time in the evenings while you are alert. Give God the best of your time to pray, systematically study his Word and then God will provide “all these things” that you desire for your life. Remember this is a promise made by Jesus. He is asking you to put that promise to the test.

Another reason I teach the rule of reading your bible systematically is that I have met too many people who only read their favorite passages over and over again. I have also met people who treat their bible like a magic 8-ball, where they open their bible to a random passage and believe God is inspiring them to read that particular passage. One of my other eight rules coming up has to do with reading your bible in context of the surrounding passage (See Rule #4). For example, after Judas betrayed Jesus, he felt guilty and went out and hung himself (Reference Matthew 27:5). Now imagine asking God what he wants you to do with your life, and randomly opening your bible to this passage! This obvious example is why it is important to read your bible in context of the surrounding passages and to work your way through the entire bible.

There are a couple of miscellaneous topics I want to bring up here in this chapter before I close. The first is the topic of writing in your bible. For those of you who never considered this idea, I also want you to know that it is ok to write in your bible. It is common for those of us who read our bible daily to highlight or underline a passage that is meaningful to us. If you are stuck or have a question about a passage, I may write a note about that question into the margin. If there is a particular passage that had a strong meaning in my life that day, I may make a notation about that passage. That way, the next time I come around to that passage, it is a reminder to myself of a past event where God has taught me something special.

Some people tend to think of the printed pages as sacred and holy and therefore, it is unacceptable to write in the margins of your bible or highlight a passage that is meaningful to you. Others think that they don't want to write in their bible because they don't want that writing to influence the next time they read that passage. One has to understand that bible reading is a personal conversation with God. I happen to like writing in my bible because my memory is not that great. If I write things down, I remember them better. If a particular passage moved me that day, I like to write it down in the margins.

As one grows in their faith as a Christian, sooner or later there is going to come “dark” periods in your life where one goes through doubts about their faith. Periods like that come because God tests our faith as to mature you as a believer. A good parent will sometimes let a child try and fail on their own, in order to learn a lesson. God works the same way. He will often let us go through things in order for us to learn. God is still there, he is just putting us through a period of trial where he is allowing bad things to happen to us for a reason. The reason I mention this here is that this is where writing in my bible has comfort to me. It is often during the times when things are not going well that little things I wrote in my bible a long time ago remind me that God is still there and God is still working in my life. Those places that I wrote in the margin or highlighted a particular word or verse is a reminder of how God is still teaching me and speaking to me. On the topic of writing in your bible, it is not a requirement. Some people would rather use notebooks, and some people don't feel comfortable writing in

the Bible. The point is the Word of God is sacred, the paper and ink upon which God's word is written is not sacred. You are free to write in your Bible if you wish. Many people, including myself find it beneficial and helpful over the long term. There are even bibles you can buy with wide margins just for the purpose of having a place to write. That is one I am currently using.

Another topic I want to talk about the problem of daydreaming. It is natural for our minds to wander. We have other things on our mind, and it is very easy to glance over a passage and not pay attention. This is another reason why I believe it is important to pray prior to starting. I like to ask God to keep me focused on the reading for the day. Do I still drift even after I pray? Of course. The human mind can only focus for so long on one thing. When you do, simply go back and take another look. Remember it is not a race to finish the book. God will not scorn you if you don't read the entire book in a year. The important idea is to learn the principals and lessons of the Bible, not to finish a certain number of chapters per day. Remember the seventeen-year-old boy with the crush. He wants to find out all he can about that girl. That idea should be a part of your bible reading. When the novelty of bible reading wears off, spend a few moments praising God and remind yourself just how much God loves you and cares for you. You want to reflect that love back to God and learn whatever God wants to show you that day.

I want to end with an illustration I heard from Dr. Charles Stanley. Imagine that you discovered you had a rich uncle that you have never heard about before. He leaves you a tremendous amount of money in his will. The will has some conditions and requirements for you in order to accept all of this money. The problem is before you can collect, you have to read and study a very complicated set of documents. You need to obey the rules set out in this will. You have to understand every part of the document. This document can be confusing and frustrating, but you work your way through it knowing that there is a great reward for getting your way through it all. The Bible is the same way. It can be confusing at times and even tedious. The more you study it as a whole, the easier it gets to understand. Like that document, there is a great reward for those who take the time and discipline to understand its principals.

Reading your bible systemically is a chore. Like the discipline of staying in shape, or say, brushing your teeth, it is a habit that has to be formed. I like to compare daily bible reading to bathing. You can survive without it, but you won't smell as nice. For what it is worth, I have yet to meet a person who at the end of their life said, "You know, I really regret all that time I spent studying my bible, it was just such a waste". Folks, it never works that way. The Bible has survived thousands of years, in tact. If you study the history of the Bible, you will learn that it has survived through persecution, bannings, ignorance, translational debates and still lives on in tact from its original form. Millions have died for others to have the privilege of reading this book.

I am convinced Satan doesn't fear someone who commits his or her life to Christ, as much as Satan fears a mature, God-trusting person who daily depends on God more than himself. The Bible is listed as the only offensive weapon we have in fighting evil (See Ephesians 6:17). It is described in a word-picture as a sword. A sword is only useful if you know how to use it. Studying your bible systemically is "sword-training". Developing a through the Bible system that works for you equips you to live the Christian life as God desires for you. Remember that being a Christian means to turn your life over to God. He is in charge and not you. The Bible

teaches you what are God's expectations of you. You can't learn them if you don't read them. The whole bible is there for your learning.

“The whole bible was given to us by inspiration from God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives; it straightens us out and helps us do what is right. It is God's way of making us well prepared at every point, fully equipped to do good to everyone.”

(2nd Timothy 3:16-17, The Living Bible)