

Chapter 5

Rule #5: "Interpret the Bible with the Bible"

One of the great discoveries of studying your bible is that although it is a collection of many different books, it is designed to work as a single entity. The Protestant Bible has a total of 66 books, and the Roman Catholic Bible has additional 14 Old Testament books. The New Testament of both versions are identical. As a Protestant Bible teacher, I don't believe the 14 additional Catholic books are God inspired, but I will save that debate for another day. The important thing I want you to see in Chapter 5 is that the principals taught in the Bible are consistent through out the Bible.

The first concept to understand behind Rule #5 is that the Bible often interprets the Bible itself. Often, when you read a confusing passage, somewhere later in the same book, the meaning of that passage is explained. If that is not the case, one can often understand the passage by reading elsewhere in the Bible. As to direct interpretation, let me give you an example:

Jesus was teaching a parable. He opened with this verse:

"A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up."
(Luke 8:5, NIV)

Now notice what Jesus says a few verses later:

"This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved."
(Luke 8:11-12, NIV)

The point is Jesus directly explains the meaning of the parable. You don't have to look elsewhere to find out what the parable means, as Jesus explains it to you directly. This is why Rule #5 is essential: "Interpret the Bible with the Bible". Now the bad news is that we don't always get direct interpretations of every verse in the Bible. This is why one often has to look elsewhere in the Bible when one is stuck on a particular passage. I'll discuss this some more through this chapter.

One of the important concepts to grasp when studying your Bible is that no single principal is meant to stand just by itself. Each principal is important and each of them have great lessons by themselves. The point is that God gives us a set of rules to learn, and not just one rule. Let me give you an example. The highway speed limit in most places in the United States is 65 miles per hour. Suppose that was the only law relevant to how fast you can drive. Now suppose it is the middle of morning rush hour, there is thick fog and you can't see more than 10-20 feet ahead of you. You think, "Hey, the speed limit is 65, and I have every right to go 65 no matter what". You can get a ticket for driving the speed limit in bad weather conditions. The point is the maximum speed law has to be balanced with other laws about safety.

The Bible teaches that same concept. The commands, rules and regulations taught in the Bible are meant to be understood as a whole group. There are 10 commandments, not one. Each one is important and each one stands alone. Yet each one is designed to work with each of the other ten. Just as one has to learn a series of laws in order to drive a car, one also has to learn a series of laws in order to understand what God expects of us in our relationship with Him and with others. This may sound overly obvious, but you would be surprised how many people take one principal or one set of principals and overly emphasize those principals over the rest of the Bible. This is another reason why I stress that the Bible is to be read systematically (Rule #2), where one reads the entire bible on a regular basis. Reading the entire bible on a regular basis helps you to not overly emphasize one principal over another.

One of the things you will notice as you read through the Bible is that there is no particular chapter on any single issue about our faith as a Christian. For example, there is no book nor chapter in the Bible titled “Everything you need to know about God and our relationship with Jesus”. There is no book nor chapter in the Bible titled “Christians and marriage”. There is no chapter titled on “How to raise godly children”. You can’t even find a book on such issues as the resurrection, salvation by faith in Jesus, or the concept of the Trinity. In fact, the word “Trinity” itself is not in the Bible. It is a term coined by the early church based on the correct principal that the God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are all equal, but separate entities.

Therefore, in order to learn about any one of these concepts one has to work their way through the entire bible. If one wants to study say, “What the Bible says about marriage”, you have to read a passage here, a passage there, an example here and an example there. Ever wonder why the Bible is like that? Why is it just a bunch of stories and instructions? Why can’t it be a more direct “how to” kind of book?

Part of the reason the Bible is designed this way is to prevent theft of any one concept. It is easier to explain if I first give you an example. During the Second World War, soldiers used radio to communicate back and forth with the command headquarters. Let’s suppose one is broadcasting at 600AM. Let’s further say your broadcasting equipment can send out a 1,000-watt signal. Now suppose your enemy finds out at what frequency you are broadcasting. They build a giant radio tower and broadcast polka music at 100,000 watts at the same frequency. This is called “hostile jamming” as the enemy is trying to “jam” your radio frequency. You are trying to communicate your position to headquarters, and all that command headquarters can hear is the Beer Barrel Polka. What do you do? The solution is to broadcast a little bit at 600AM, a little bit of the message to 700AM, a little bit at 800AM, etc. You design a radio where you spread out your message over a wider spectrum. This way an enemy can’t broadcast over the same individual frequency that you are trying to broadcast upon. The Bible does the same thing. To prevent someone from destroying a key chapter or book, all the principals are spread out over the entire Bible so an enemy can’t do any “hostile jamming”.

This is why Rule #5 is so important and bears repeating “Interpret the Bible with the Bible”. It is not just that a rule or principal is repeated elsewhere in the Bible. A concept for us to learn is scattered throughout the Bible. Studying all those points is like putting together pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. By studying some or all the passages on a given topic gives one understanding of that topic.

OK John, now I am confused. You told me to read through my bible systematically. Now you are telling me to jump back and forth and find every cross-reference to every idea in the Bible. Before you throw this book at me, I better explain further. One does not have to do a topical study of every concept. One simply has to remember that the principals are scattered throughout the books of the Bible, and the principals are consistent throughout those same books. Therefore, if you want to take on a study of an individual topic, you are now aware of how to take on that study.

For those who don't know, there is a wonderful help book available called a concordance. This reference book has every word of the Bible in alphabetical order and where that word is located within the Bible. For example, if you want to study baptism. You look up the word baptism, baptize, etc. in a concordance, and see all the places where the word is used in the Bible. Because there are different English translations, there are different concordances for those translations. For example, there is a King James Concordance for the King James Bible. There is an NIV (New International Version) Concordance for the NIV Bible. Most of the popular translations have concordances. In the back of many study bibles is a "mini-concordance". I promise you it is only a summary and not a complete concordance. For those of you who have a computer, concordances have become obsolete. One can buy Bible software with a translation and do a search for the word "baptism". The computer will then show you every passage and you can read it for yourself. Whenever I am confused on a topic, I turn to my bible software and look for that same word elsewhere in the Bible. Most bible software will even let you search for the original Greek and Hebrew words and you can see elsewhere how it is used.

Sometimes there is a much quicker way to look up a cross reference than to check your computer or your concordance. Many study bibles have other bible verse references in the margins. This is designed as a quick cross-link. For example, many writers of the New Testament quote the Old Testament. If you want to read that Old Testament passage yourself, the margins will say where that passage is located. Sometimes a bible story will quote or refer to a past event mentioned earlier in the Bible. Those same margin notes will give the cross-reference. Sometimes those cross-references are topical. If a verse is confusing to you and you own a study bible, look at the cross-reference verses in the margin for that verse. Often it will lead you to another verse that will help explain the passage better.

There is another principal among bible scholars called "hermeneutics". This is a fancy word that just means that the first time an idea or word is used in the Bible is very important. It is also called "The Law of First Mention". You don't have to remember either one of those terms. You should remember that if you are stuck on a particular word or concept, try to find out the first time that word or concept is used. It is often consistent throughout the Bible. With that said, one can take semester long courses on Hermeneutics. These bible college classes will go over all the major terms of the Bible, discussed where they are first used and how they are consistent throughout the Bible. Many pastors own a set of reference encyclopedias that with bible topics and their references within the Bible. For example, you look up angels in this encyclopedia, and it will show you every reference in the Bible that where angels are mentioned or even suggested. These books often give the principals and ideas being taught in those passages.

This principle of “first mention” even applies to numbers in the Bible. For example, God created the earth in six days and He rested on the 7th day (See Exodus 20:10). If you study the use of the number 7 in the Bible, it is associated with “completeness” or “Godly perfection” as God rested from all his work on the 7th day. The point is not to memorize all the numbers of the Bible and look for each of its hidden meaning. The point is to understand that the Bible is consistent in its word usage and often its number usage throughout the books of the Bible.

I want to talk a little bit about contradictory verses. Every now and then, you will come across a verse that sounds like it is contrary to something else taught in the Bible. Compare these two verses shown below.

Verse#1: “Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this (Jesus) name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.” Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than men!”
(Acts 5:27-29, NIV)

Verse#2: Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. (Romans 13:1-2, NIV)

In the first verse, the religious leaders in Israel gave Peter strict orders not to preach about Jesus. Peter disobeyed them by saying, “We must obey God rather than men”. In Verse #2 listed above, in Paul’s letter to the Romans, Paul is teaching that all men, including Christians must submit themselves to governing authorities, as all authorities have been established by God. Now that sounds like a contradiction. How can one part of the Bible say it is acceptable to disobey authority and another section say we must obey authority?

Let me answer that by getting back to my driving illustration. The speed limit says 65 miles per hour. Yet, if it is foggy with minimal visibility, is driving 65 mph a safe thing to do? Of course not. One must read rules in balance with other rules. The same applies to the Bible. As to this specific example, there is a principal in the Bible called “Higher Law”. There are situations where people disobey government authorities, because it violates other biblical principles. For example, if the government outlaws praying to no god but a pagan statue, that is a violation of the 10 commandments. You may choose to disobey that government laws in order to not violate the 10 commandments. Remember that you still may have to go to jail for disobeying the government law, but you are applying the “Higher Law” principal. This is a rule to be used sparingly. It is usually obvious when it needs to be invoked. One still has to pay the consequences to the government of obeying that higher law.

As to Peter and the apostles disobeying the authority, they were given direct orders by Jesus to spread the gospel. Just as missionaries smuggle bibles into parts of the world where bible ownership is illegal, so Peter and the apostles disobeyed government authority in that particular situation. If you read that chapter in the Book of Acts, Peter and the apostles had to

physically suffer for that decision. The point of this illustration is to try to get you to see the principal of “balance” of Rule #5: “Interpret the Bible with the Bible”.

There is another reason I stress Rule #5. It has to do with this other principle: “The word-pictures of the Old Testament are the principles of the New Testament”. Once you start reading your way through the Old Testament, you will discover that the Bible likes to use a lot of word pictures. There are many visual stories that are told. God did this on purpose. Our minds remember stories and graphic illustrations much better than we do facts and figures. Most people know the story of Noah’s ark, but how many people can remember off the top of their heads the names of Noah’s three sons? Again, we remember stories and word pictures better than we do facts and figures. My point is not that the names of Noah’s three sons are not important, it is simply that our minds remember stories better than we do facts and figures and names. This is another reason that I teach the importance of “Interpreting the Bible with the Bible”. Those stories are often important to remember in other sections of the bible. Let me explain further:

Those Old Testament word pictures are often taught in the New Testament in terms of principals for us to learn. Much of the New Testament is instructional. It teaches of God’s love, God’s redemptive plan for our lives, and God’s expectations of us as believers. Almost all of these principals can be found somewhere in the Old Testament as word-pictures. God calling his chosen people out of Egypt is a word-picture of those of us who are “called” out of this world to serve God as Christian believers. When reading stories in the Old Testament, stop and ask yourself, “Why did God use this particular way of illustrating this story? Why did God choose this particular way to punish the Israelites or this particular way to bless the Israelites for some deed that they did (or didn’t do)? What is God trying to teach me from this story?” Asking questions like that to God, which is a form of prayer, can be one of the most wonderful blessings one can have from reading their bible. I could go on for days and teach illustration after illustration on this principal. Remember that those details given in the Bible are there for a reason. They are not just colorful adjectives used to describe a story. They are all meant to teach principles.

It is time to restate something Jesus said that I already quoted once before in this book:

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, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” (John 5:39-40, NIV)

In this passage, Jesus is claiming that the Old Testament teaches about him. When you read the Old Testament, much of what you read teaches about Jesus. Much of the Old Testament is prophecy, which simply means predictive. Some of these predictions are blunt and some are more obscure. Both Jews and Christians teach that many of the predictions taught in the Bible are in the forms of patterns. One can read the patterns of a bible character and contrast those to our lives. Further, the New Testament is filled with examples of how the patterns and direct prophecies stated in the Old Testament are fulfilled through Jesus. Not every Old Testament prophecy or pattern has to do with Jesus, but many, if not a majority of them do. Many direct prophecies are about the nation of Israel and some are about the fate of the nations near Israel. My point is that one can study the Old Testament and specifically look for passages about Jesus.

The New Testament will often validate those passages. That is why Rule #5 is important: “Interpret the Bible with the Bible”.

Let me give you a few examples. One of the main purposes of the Gospel of Matthew is to show that Jesus is the promised Messiah (i.e., king) as predicted in the Old Testament. The Gospel of Matthew is filled with Old Testament quotations and predictions. Matthew’s Gospel shows how Jesus has fulfilled those particular predictions. Some of these predictions are obscure and one would never know the Old Testament passage is about Jesus without someone like Matthew saying it was. (For an example on this compare Matthew 2:18 with its quotation from Jeremiah 31:15.) This is because Old Testament predictions are often in the form of “life-patterns” or lifestyle patterns” that teach of things the Messiah will do when he comes. Others Old Testament predictions are more famous and obvious like the “Virgin Birth” prediction of Jesus (See Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:22-23).

Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”
(Revelation 19:10, NIV)

In the Book of Revelation, this verse listed above is saying that the “spirit of prophecy” is about Jesus. In the Book of Acts, when Paul was trying to convince Jews that Jesus is the Messiah, he would quote through many Old Testament passages to show how they are describing some aspect of Jesus’ first coming. I am convinced that every aspect of Jesus life, death, ministry and even his miracles are written or hinted upon somewhere in the Old Testament. When reading your Old Testament, one can look for passages about Jesus all over the place. Jesus himself declares this to be true. I can’t speak on any higher authority than that! Many study bibles will often have notes on Old Testament passages and how they tie to Jesus. There are also commentaries you can purchase in Christian bookstores specifically on this topic.

Let’s say you come to a passage in the Old Testament that confuses you. An idea to try to make it clearer is “Is there some aspect of Jesus life, death, or principal that Jesus taught that fits into this passage? Sometimes this helps to clear up a passage. Sometimes it doesn’t, but it never hurts to try! To use an old bible teacher cliché “Put Jesus in the middle of the passage and see if it works”.

Ever heard the term “Half the fun is getting there?” That really applies to Rule #5. This book is not meant to give you every possible illustration of how the word pictures of the Old Testament are the principals in the New Testament. This book is not meant to show you all the details throughout the Bible that point to Jesus. Half the fun is learning them for yourself. I didn’t master the major concepts and principals of the Bible in a day, nor has anybody in the history of mankind. Learning your bible is like eating an elephant. It can be done, one bite at a time. It is a joyous and wonderful experience where one keeps growing and growing in the knowledge and love of God. Spending time daily in the Bible is the adventure of the lifetime. Some of the greatest moments of joy are the discoveries I have made in reading and learning the principles of this book and how they apply to my life.

There is an interesting proverb that I'll use to wrap up this chapter:

It is the glory of God to conceal a matter;
To search out a matter is the glory of kings. (Proverbs 25:2, NIV)

What does that mean? To paraphrase, God conceals things for us to find. It is the joy of kings to find out those things. Think of the fun of solving a mystery or a child on an Easter egg hunt. One of the great joys of reading and studying your bible is to find all the wonderful things God has hidden in there for us to learn and read. "Interpreting your Bible with the Bible" is one of the great keys to understanding the strange puzzles and passages of the Bible. It is a joy to discover the meanings as you work your way through the Bible.