

Chapter 7

Rule #7: “The Plain Things are the Main Things and the Main Things are the Plain Things”

The principal behind Rule #7 can be described as the foundational rule of studying your bible. It teaches you to observe the plain meaning of the text before one starts to figure out possible meanings and possible applications for your life. Rule #7 is about not reading more into the scripture than what is actually written in the text itself. Rule #7 is about asking what does the text actually and literally *say* before you jump into questions about what does the text *mean*.

There are a number of titles I could use for Rule #7. I felt this one is the easiest to remember and covers the full concept behind the idea of simply studying what the Bible says before trying to interpret its meaning. The first time I heard Rule #7 as it is titled was by a pastor named Allistar Begg. He has a nationally syndicated radio show and is a wonderful bible expositor. I was listening to his audio commentaries on the book of Daniel in preparation for my own teachings on that book. He was commenting on this bible verse:

“Just as you saw that the feet and toes were partly of baked clay and partly of iron, so this will be a divided kingdom; yet it will have some of the strength of iron in it, even as you saw iron mixed with clay.” (Daniel 2:41, NIV)

In Chapter 2, Daniel is interpreting a dream of King Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel was describing a statue that Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream. Daniel describes the feet and toes of this statue as a mixture of clay and iron. Daniel goes on to explain the meaning of the statue, and in this passage explains the meaning of the iron and clay feet and toes.

Allistar Begg described how he has heard sermons on the meaning of the ten toes and what each of the ten toes represent. The problem with those sermons is the number “ten” is never mentioned anywhere in this passage. Mr. Begg’s point is not that the statue didn’t have ten toes, but that people were reading things into the text that were not there. Allistar Begg then yelled out with his wonderful Scottish accent, “The Plain Things are the Main Things and the Main Things are the Plain Things”.

When I heard that, it stopped me dead in my tracks. I have heard this principal before, but I have never heard it expressed so eloquently as that line. I don’t know if Allistar Begg wrote that, or if he got it from someone else. Personally, it doesn’t sound as eloquent when I say it as I lack a good accent.

The principle behind Rule #7 is to look at what the Bible says and stop there. Rule #7 is about not reading more into the text than what is stated in the text. Further Rule #7 is to remind us not to obsess on the implications of hidden meanings as much as we are to observe the plain message being taught by the text itself.

I know that I am guilty of this in some of my early teachings. I happen to love some of the obscure details of the Bible text. One of the joys of reading and learning the Bible is to discover some of the wonderful details and subtleties of the message of the text. This is all fine and

good, but if you are learning those details at the expense of missing the main message of the text, then you are missing the main message God is trying to teach you.

For example, I spoke earlier about the “ideal wife” in the last 22 verses of Chapter 31 of the Book of Proverbs. In this section of Proverbs, Solomon describes the ideal for a wife and mother. He gives twenty-two Proverbs in that chapter on this topic. I mentioned earlier in this book how there are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The 22 verses each begin with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in alphabetical order. Now that is interesting, but in comparison to the message itself, so what? “The plain things are the main things and the main things are the plain things!” The trivial tidbit about the alphabetical order of the letters is not nearly as important as what we can learn about the ideal behavior for women by reading this section of Proverbs.

Let me give you a different type of example that also applies to this principal. Let’s use the shortest verse in the Bible:

“Jesus wept”. (John 11:35)

In the surrounding text, Jesus’ friend Lazarus had just died and Jesus is surrounded by a roomful of people mourning. I could say that Jesus was feeling the sorrow of the lack of faith, as Jesus’ friends didn’t believe he was capable of raising Lazarus from the dead. I could say Jesus wept because he also understood the pain caused by death and separation. The point is I am interpreting this passage and not reading this passage. There is nothing wrong with these interpretations and one can argue they are biblically correct. The point is not that I am incorrectly interpreting the verse, but that I am ignoring what the verse actually says, which is simply “Jesus wept.” This overly simple example is trying to make the point that one should simply read what the text says before launching off into possible interpretations.

The concept behind Rule #7 is to simply observe what the text is saying before thinking of possible interpretations. One of the great illustrations on reading the text plainly comes from the old radio and television show “Dragnet”. The main character, Sergeant Joe Friday was famous for the cliché, “Just the facts ma’am”. Whenever he would interview a female witness to a crime, the witness would often ramble on with her own interpretation of the crime events. Joe Friday would interrupt the witness and say “Just the facts, ma’am.” It was Joe’s way to remind the person to let the police interpret the evidence and to simply explain the situation. Going back to “Jesus’ wept”, the text does not say how much Jesus hurt in pain, it just says, “Jesus wept”, period. Anything over and above that is interpretation. Interpretation is fine, but one has to be well grounded in what the text says before one can move on to what the text means. Rule #7 is to remind us to first focus on what the text says and just what the text says before we can properly move on to what the text means and how it applies to our lives.

If Joe Friday was interviewing me on the topic of Jesus’ weeping, I would probably go into my interpretations of why Jesus was weeping. Joe would say, “Just the facts, sir”. He would then write on his message pad, “Jesus wept.” That’s the point. Before we can start interpreting the verse, we have to correctly observe, “Simply what the Bible is saying, simply”. That last phrase can be an alternative interpretation of Rule #7, but the title I used for Rule #7 has a broader meaning and therefore I prefer the title as it is written.

A reason Rule #7 is important is that we get bored. We read a passage of the Bible that we have read a dozen times before and we think, "Ok, I already know the main meaning, but maybe I can look for more interesting, subtle underlying meanings as well." Rule #7 is a strong reminder to those of us who read our bible regularly. We look at passages we know well and look for subtle interpretations because we know, or we think we are already familiar with the basic meaning.

Chuck Smith, who is the pastor of Calvary Chapel of Costa Mesa gave a comment one time in a sermon that I believe related well to Rule #7. He said: "I am not interested in new truth. I am interested in old truth". The danger of bible teachers is they want to find new meanings of the Bible. Occasionally someone will write a book and claim, "I have discovered a new truth about a bible verse that has never been revealed before." My first rule is to watch out and be very cautious about what that person has to say. If that person is giving an interpretation that is contrary to other principals taught in the Bible, they are probably reading it out of context of the surrounding verses.

This gets back to the main objective of studying your bible: That is, to learn what God expects of you in relationship with Him and in relationship with others. I have stated earlier in this book that studying your bible can be summed up in three questions: 1) What does it say? 2) What does it mean? and 3) What does it have to do with my life? Every time I teach the Bible, all of my commentary should be answers to one, two or all three questions. Rule #7 mainly about "What does the Bible say? When the text mentions an idea, first think about the idea without adding anything to the idea. Then ponder possible meanings and how that idea applies to your life. The danger is reading something into the text that is not there.

Let me give you an example how this rule brought me back to good bible study principals. At one time, I got involved in a trendy, scholarly bible study called "Equal Distance Letter Spacing". This is a study that requires learning the Bible in its original language. Jewish Rabbi's discovered word patterns in the scripture by counting every 5th letter or every 8th letter or every 23rd letter as examples. They would ignore word spaces and punctuation marks, but just look at the letters. They would find words and patterns that were related to the text itself. The original studies were tested by the mathematic departments of the University of Judaism (in Jerusalem) for accuracy, and more importantly for "statistical significance". The idea was to find things in the text that were beyond just mere coincidence.

I got to a point after a year or so where I knew the pro and con arguments of these studies very well. I could give you a dynamite presentation on its accuracy, and I could give you an excellent presentation on the worthlessness of these findings. It is now many years later, and the topic is no longer trendy, but the pro and con arguments continue. I stopped my studies on this, as I believed I got all I could get out of the topic and there was nowhere else to go. All of that study was interesting, but I wasn't maturing in my faith as a believer from these studies. In summary, I got bored and I moved on like most people who studied the topic. Then I read a verse in the new testament that reminded me of Rule #7:

“For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that, as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus.”
(2nd Corinthians 1:13-14, NIV)

Notice the first sentence of these two verses. It says, “for we (referring to Paul and Timothy) do not write anything you cannot read or understand”. I believe what Paul was trying to say is that no hidden or special meanings in the Greek text. The point is to read the text and, well, stop there. There is plenty to learn from just reading the plain text of the Bible without looking for hidden meanings beneath the text.

This verse in 2nd Corinthians reminded me of what was important in bible study: “The Plain Things are the Main Things and the Main Things are the Plain Things”. Studying those Hebrew letter patterns was interesting. At best, if they are true, they are simply an additional proof to validate the Bible as the Word of God, and nothing more. They are not designed to predict the future or any other special purpose. I happen to believe the Bible is the Word of God with or without this study. I can validate the Bible as the Word of God several other ways other than Equal Distance Letter Spacing techniques. The point is, “Ok, you believe this is the Word of God, what are you doing about it?” Believing the Bible is the Word of God is only the first step on a long journey. Rule #7 is to remind us to learn what the text says as priority over subtle and possible hidden meanings. If you happen to believe the Bible is the Word of God, you don’t have to spend a lot of time looking for additional validation. Move on to learn about what the text teaches. There are some people who are called into the ministry of defending the Bible. That is all well and good. I just don’t believe studying the Bible as validation that it is the Word of God is nearly as important as studying your bible to teach you how to mature in your faith as a believer.

The last thing to remember is that Rule #7 needs to be used in conjunction with the other rules presented in this book. The plain meaning of the Bible text is the foundation upon we build proper interpretation and proper understanding. Reading the “plain things” in context of the surrounding verses is equally as important. That is the principal behind Rule #4. (“A Text Taken out of Context Becomes a Pretext”). Reading the “plain things” in context of the whole of the Bible is equally as important. That is the principal behind Rule #5 (“Interpret the Bible with the Bible”). I could go on to list all the rules, but hopefully you get the idea. Rule #7 can also be paraphrased as “What does the Bible say?” with the key word being “say”. What the Bible doesn’t “say” is what you are adding to the text. What the Bible does not say is important for interpretation, but it is not important on the foundational principal of understanding the text.

This is also the danger of “very paraphrased” versions of the Bible. Whenever you translate a book from one language to another, it is often difficult to get the same concept translated. Some translations are very literal. Some are “word for word” and others are “thought for thought”. Some take a lot of liberties in translating the original text. The danger in strongly paraphrased bibles is often you can get the author’s opinion of the Bible text that can be different from what the original author was trying to convey. When in doubt in those situations, consider referencing multiple translations.

The Bible itself comments on the topic of adding to the text as it is written. Near the very end of the Bible itself is a stern warning by God himself:

“I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.” (Revelation 22:18-19, NIV)

Well now, that’s not good. In direct context, this text is a warning to not add or detract from the words written in the Book of Revelation. Some commentators believe the principal applies to all the words of the Bible. One can also read the final words of Moses and see a similar principal (See Deuteronomy Chapters 31-32). Another principal one can learn from these verses in Revelation is that God wants you to take seriously the Bible just as it is written. Don’t add any words to it and don’t take away any words that are written in this book. The point is to read the plain text just as it is written and not try to add or detract from what is written in the book.

Rule #7 is a great rule to remember when you are stuck on a particular passage of the Bible. Whenever you don’t understand a passage of the Bible, it often helps to go back to the basics and apply Rule #7: “The Plain Things are the Main Things and the Main Things are the Plain Things. When you are stuck, ask the Sergeant Joe Friday question, “Just the fact’s ma’am”. At that moment, stop trying to interpret the text and simply focus on what the Bible is saying. The “plain things” of the Bible will often shed new meaning as you eliminate some preconceived notions of possible meanings. The “plain things” comes first, and then comes interpretation and finally comes application. Remember the three basic questions to ask when studying your bible: 1) what does it say? 2) What does it mean? and 3) How does it apply to my life? Rule #7 is stating that you must answer these questions in order. If you fail to see what the text plainly says, you will fail to properly ask what does it mean and how it applies to our lives.