

## TEN RULES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

© 2004 by William H. Gross – [www.onthewing.org](http://www.onthewing.org)

**Rule 1. Scripture is the very word of God, and is inerrant in its original autographs.** This means we don't believe that the NIV, NASB, KJV or any other translation is inerrant. There may be printing errors in them, or words may have been mistranslated. However, we do believe that the original writings by the prophets of the OT and the writers of the NT were inerrant in all they affirm. These original manuscripts have been copied and re-copied for thousands of years. We assume, and are very confident, that they have been accurately copied. But we also expect that, from time to time, we will find missing paragraphs or better manuscripts than we currently have. As long as they do not conflict with what we have in our hands as far as doctrine is concerned, we may use them to derive better translations.

**Rule 2. Scripture is best interpreted by Scripture itself, and not by external events or writings.** We assume that the Bible has a single voice, and that voice is God's. He spoke through men as the Spirit moved them (2Pet. 1:21). Each writer had a personality, a culture, and a point in time, that affected the *style* of what was written (rules 7 and 8), but not the *content*. Because there is a single voice, we further assume that there is a single story that runs from cover to cover. It is a single message of God's sovereignty, and his plan to redeem us. If we want to understand a particular passage, we may rightly assume that the Bible itself has the information we need to understand it. We say that the NT is the fulfillment and explanation of the OT; the OT is the promise and foundation of the NT. It is a package deal. Trying to use external documents that are *not* inspired, to understand that which *is* inspired, would be a fruitless task. Using external events in our time to explain a message written to someone in another time likewise produces strange conclusions (rule 7). Using a commentary, confession, or systematic theology, is helpful, but these external writings are not conclusive. Only God's word is conclusive.

**Rule 3. The majority of passages on a specific topic will outweigh any exceptional passages on the same topic.** The main point here is that we cannot mix apples and oranges when interpreting. We must first determine whether two passages are in fact speaking to the same issue. A passage that at first glance seems to be an exception to a particular teaching, or seems to create a conflict, may not be exceptional or conflicting at all. It may be addressing a different topic or circumstance altogether. We assume, because of rules 1 and 2, that there are no irreconcilable conflicts in the Bible. They may be mysteries, but they not contradictory. When we encounter such passages, there are very good tools available to help us resolve apparent conflicts. For example, try Gleason Archer's, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*.

The most glaring passage, as far as a seeming contradiction goes, is Heb. 6:4. We are apparently told that we can lose our salvation. Yet the overwhelming majority of NT passages say that we are completely and finally saved when we believe in Christ. We are not made salvable for the moment; we don't receive eternal life for the moment. We are eternally saved by God's grace and sovereignty, the continuing mediation of Christ, and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:14). The majority of passages on this topic must therefore over-rule this apparent exception. Now we are left to explain it. Maybe we misunderstand the context, or maybe it's a bad translation, or maybe the person was never saved in the first place. That makes good material for an ongoing debate.

Another example would be the apparent conflict between Romans and James with regard to works. But it is only apparent. In point of fact, we are looking at two very different processes between these two books. When James talks about the necessity of works, he is talking about what arises from our salvation, as a natural and inevitable consequence of it. When Paul talks about the inadequacy of our works, he is talking about the cause of our salvation, which is the atoning sacrifice and works of Christ alone. Thus, our works are the necessary result, not the procuring cause, of our salvation. Our works are necessary, but inadequate: no conflict.

**Rule 4. A specific passage outweighs a general passage *on the same topic*. Consequently, a specific passage would also outweigh a majority of passages that are only general in nature.**

There are passages that state a proposition in very general terms. And then there are very specific passages concerning that same proposition. The specific passage is the controlling one. For example, John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” This is a *general* passage. We have questions about the word “world” and whether it means the whole world: every man, woman, and child. We have questions about the word “whoever” and whether it means that everyone is capable of choosing Christ. We need something more specific to help us determine how these two words are being used. Are there specific passages, on the same topic, that have more detail? If so, they can help us answer these questions.

In John 6:37, 44, for example, we have the same book, the same author, and the same topic. We read, “All that the Father gives to me will come to me, and the one who comes to me I will never cast out... None can come to me unless the Father, who sent me, draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.” In John 15:16 Jesus says, “You did not choose me, but I chose you...” So we know that “whoever” does not mean everyone, but only those who were drawn to Christ by the Father. These are referred to as “the elect.”

We can look at the word “world” in the Greek to see if it has a specific meaning. It is “kosmos,” and it refers to the orb of the earth, or to its inhabitants in general: the masses. And so the world here is the world of men, with no indication of the scope of those who are the object of God’s love. There was a promise in Isaiah 49:6 that Israel would be a light to the Gentiles. Paul tells us that the “mystery” revealed in Christ is that the promise was not only to the Jews but to the world beyond them: the Gentiles or non-Jews (Rom. 11:25; Eph. 3:3-6). We could say that this promise was made to the world at large, and not just to the Jews. But we could not say that it was made to everyone in the world. Are there specific passages to confirm this conclusion?

Look at John 8:42-47. Jesus tells his audience that they cannot hear the promise, that their father is not his Father, that there are two families: one condemned by their sin, whose father is the devil, and one saved by grace, whose father is God. This is confirmed in Mal. 1:3 and Rom. 9:6-13 where we learn that God hated Esau before he was born, before he had yet done right or wrong. Paul explains that some are created for common purposes, and some for noble purposes (Rom. 9:16-24). And so these specific passages clarify and limit the general passage in John 3:16. You may have heard that “all means all;” but it seldom does.

**Rule 5. The truth of any given verse will be consistent with the whole truth of Scripture.**

Because the Bible is a single, consistent story told many times over by a single mind, there is a coherent body of truth contained in it. That body of truth reveals who God is, who we are, our relationship to him, his plan for us, etc. When we come across a passage that seems inconsistent with that body of truth, we can be sure that we misunderstand what is being said. God says that

he alone is God, there are no others (Isa. 46:9-10). And yet we read in John 10:34-35 that we are called “gods.” Mormon theology picks up on this. The passage quoted in the NT is Psalm 82:6. The word is “*elohim*” which is the word for God. But it also means “judges” or “mighty ones” – the verse goes on to explain that this title is ours because we are children of the Most High. We are possessed of God (Eph. 1:14), not independent gods.

**Rule 6. Therefore, the context of any given verse is also the whole of Scripture.** Some folks think that if they read the paragraph before and the paragraph after, that they are reading a verse “in context.” Rules 4, 5, 7 and 8 show why the context is far larger than the surrounding text of a verse, and yet why it must be limited to passages that are topically related. The Bible is a unity as well as a collection of books. It tells a single story of God’s redemptive plan in Jesus Christ. We call that a meta-narrative, an over-arching and unifying story. If we don’t read each passage with that broad view in mind, then we can easily misinterpret or misapply a single passage. We can take extraordinary measures to ensure all our pieces are authentic and accurate, and yet still go wrong if we don’t know how each fits into the whole. Irenaeus wrote that biblical interpretation requires knowing what the pattern is supposed to be before we begin assembling the pieces. He said to think of an image of a king made from a pile of mosaic tiles. By rearranging them we can turn the image of that king into a fox with the very same “authentic” tiles.

**Rule 7. The meaning of any given verse is determined by its author, audience, circumstance, and intent.** In other words, it was written by a particular author (even if we don’t know his name), to a particular audience (even if we don’t know their names), at a particular point in time (even if we can’t specify the year), with a message intended for *them*, not for *us*, using language that was clear and meaningful to *them*, not necessarily to *us*. From this message, as it was understood by its original audience, we may extract an ageless *principle* that may be applied to similar circumstances in our own time. It is tempting to think that a passage speaks directly to us, as if there was no original audience. God does speak directly to us through his word, but only *after* we have determined what is being said. The principles are what speak to us, indirectly. The text does not speak to us directly. Let me explain what I mean by that. The words of the text are place-holders and containers for principles, or teachings. Indeed, the word “logos” which means “word” as in the “Word of God,” refers to the doctrines of Scripture, the teachings that it contains. If we take the message to be the text itself, without putting it in context, the meaning will become distorted. “Pluck out your eye if it offends you” has a context that suggests we ought to keep our eye, but clean up our attitude. We must derive its meaning before we can determine its application.

**Rule 8. The author, audience, circumstance, and intent, are determined in large part by the language that is used.** This rule refers to vocabulary, grammar, style, syntax, idioms, allusions, symbols, types, etc. Style refers to whether the specific verse we are reading is literal, metaphorical, poetic, prophetic, etc. You may have heard a rule of interpretation which says that we should take a passage literally unless there is a good reason not to. Well, that rule is a little too broad to be useful. In prophetic literature, we actually take it *figuratively* unless there is good reason not to. So the style of the verse we are reading determines how we are to take it, not the other way around. Psalm 61:4 says that we are protected under God’s wings. Our first inclination should not be to take it literally, as if God were a large chicken. In other words, we don’t take it literally and then find a reason not to take it that way. We first recognize what kind of style we are dealing with, and then we proceed to interpret it accordingly.

**Rule 9. We rely on the original language, and not a translation of it, to determine the actual meaning of a Scriptural passage** (*that's why altering the original language text of Scripture using questionable manuscripts from apostate churches is so dangerous*). As in English, the Greek and Hebrew words of Scripture can have a number of meanings, and a number of English words could be used to render the meaning of the original. Some of those words have connotations (implied meanings) in addition to their denotations (direct meanings). In large part, we rely on the translators to work out those details. However, there are often biases in theology and doctrine that sway the choices they make. We want to use a number of translations to get a better feel for what is being said. Some translations are word-for-word (NASB, NKJV, KJV, ASV, ESV). Others are idea-for-idea (NIV, NLT). Some are paraphrases (LB, ECV). Some are restatements (e.g. The Message, The Book of God). Some ideas in Greek or Hebrew don't exist in English, and so word-for-word substitutions cannot be made. Idea-for-idea substitutions are only approximations by necessity. In other words, language itself is a problem.

Here's an example: In John 13:23, the usual translation goes something like this, "Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom [or against his breast] one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved." Others say that this disciple was "at table" with Jesus, or reclining next to him. If the disciple is leaning against Jesus, it seems overly affectionate for the setting. And it makes us wonder why that same disciple had to "lean over toward Jesus" when Peter asked him to find out who the betrayer would be (v. 25). If he was already lying against him there, why would he need to lean over? The issue is the word "bosom." This same word is used to describe a bay for boats (Acts 27:39). It means an enclosed, private area, like a breast-pocket, or something u-shaped, like a bay. In the verse in John, it could be describing something like a booth in a restaurant. That fits with Acts. As it turns out, it is a figure of speech in Greek that means you are sitting in a position of honor at the table (near the host). So the translations affect our understanding of the verse. Having seen several translations, we realize there is a point of contention about the phrase. Looking at the Greek (or an explanation of the Greek) may clear it up for us.

**Rule 10. To understand the things of God, we depend on the illumination of the Holy Spirit, and not on our own knowledge, logic, or intellect alone; and certainly never on our feelings.** Some of us think that because we have the Spirit of God to guide us, our personal impressions about a passage will be correct. "Well I feel like it says..." Being guided by the Holy Spirit does not mean we have our own personal guru who gives us independent insights – insights that conflict with what he has told the church as a whole. Others are convinced that God's word is propositional. They believe it is logical and understandable through reason. "Well logically it must mean..." Although God is knowable, logical, and consistent, our intellect alone will fail us. We are corrupt creatures. Intellect will not and cannot help non-believers. That's where the Holy Spirit comes in. He renews our mind (Rom. 12:2), not our emotions, so that we can understand the word of God (1Cor. 2:12). The problem is that our fallen nature continues to influence our renewed mind. As a result, we cannot know *everything* with complete confidence and accuracy, but we can know *many* things confidently and accurately. We grow more and more in our knowledge as we practice the truth of Scripture in the way we live.

Well, if reason and emotions are always suspect, does this mean we are incapable of determining the meaning of God's word? Not at all! That's one reason God has given us the Church. It is God's school for believers. It is the corporate and historic understanding of God's word, the give and take between believers over time, which establishes the truth of God's word. And yet, the word of God always supersedes the teaching of any individual elder, church, or denomination.

This lack of clarity shouldn't cause us to *doubt*. Instead, it should cause us to study God's Word with *diligence and humility*. We should never think that we have arrived and know all things (Phil. 3:12). We learn from one another and we teach one another with respect, deference, and submission. We always seek to edify, encourage, and comfort one another from God's word. It is not a tool of manipulation and control. It is not a means to gain glory and a following for ourselves. It is for the glory of God alone. *Soli Deo Gloria*.

Augustine wrote, "*If you chance upon anything (in Scripture) that does not seem to be true, you must not conclude that the sacred writer made a mistake; rather your attitude should be that the manuscript is faulty, or the version is not accurate, or you yourself do not understand the matter.*" (DePotent., IV, 1,8)

### THE INTERPRETIVE PROCESS

When we're interpreting the Bible, we want to be purposeful in doing it. A simple and common three-step approach is to determine,

**(1) What it says** – This is about word definitions, grammar, syntax, structure, and images. We may resort to dictionaries, and compare various translations of the passage, etc., but we don't resort to a commentary yet. We want to work this out on our own using some basic tools. *Until you're sure that you know what it's saying, you must not proceed to step 2.*

**(2) What it means** – This step is more challenging because we need a broader context than what's in front of us. Is this an isolated verse, or are there other verses on this topic? Is this verse referring to another verse or event? Is similar phrasing found elsewhere? Who is the audience? What is the circumstance? Is this actually the same as other verses on the topic, or different? Its meaning (its *truth*) is fixed (it means only one thing); it's not relative ("I feel like it means..."). Ask yourself, "Is this *descriptive* or *prescriptive*?" Is it describing what happened, or is it prescribing what to do? Judges is predominantly descriptive, so be cautious (Jdg 17.6). Try this: were the Israelites correct to put away their wives in Ezra 10.7? If God hates divorce (Mal 2.16; Mat 5.32; 1Cor 7.13), then why would this divorce be acceptable? If you cannot determine that confidently, go to a reliable commentary (Matt. Henry, John Gill, John Calvin, etc.). *Until you're sure you know what it means, you must not proceed to step 3.*

**(3) What it means 'to me.'** This is the application of God's Word to you, *personally*. The Bible is not for information only, but to grow in the knowledge and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the step that **sanctifies** your soul (Joh 17.17). What is it in your heart, or in your life, or in your current circumstances – *whether in your relationship to God or to your neighbor* – that is addressed or exposed by this passage? What is the evil to be avoided, or the good to be done? And now, what are you personally going to *do* about it, *today*?

### ANCILLARY PRINCIPLES

The "Big Ten" only create a general framework from which to work out the content and meaning of a passage, with the goal of applying God's truth to our life. But it's not always clear when they apply, or how far to go with them – otherwise we'd all agree. So what other principles might be useful in special situations, to help our understanding and practical application?

**LISTS** — A list may either be exclusive (complete) or exemplary (partial). In Galatians 5.19-23, we have two well-known lists: one lists the *works of the flesh*, and the other the *fruit of the Spirit*. Are they *exclusive* (there are no others), or are they *exemplary* (just examples)? In each list, the word "such" indicates they are exemplary: *such as these*. So they are clearly examples, and not

an exhaustive or exclusive list that *excludes* all others. That's simple enough. But what about the list of gifts in 1Cor 14?

An entire industry has sprung up to help believers “identify” their gifts; but the premise is that the list is exclusive and not exemplary. They include other passages like Romans 12 to help “complete” their list, but in the end, it's a *fixed* list. They ignore passages like Exo 28:3, 4

“So you shall speak to all *who are gifted artisans*, whom I have *filled with the spirit of wisdom*, that they may make Aaron's garments, to consecrate him, that he may minister to Me as priest. <sup>4</sup> And these *are* the garments which they shall make: a breastplate, an ephod, a robe, a skillfully woven tunic, a turban, and a sash.”

Or Exo 35:30-35:

“And Moses said to the children of Israel, "See, the LORD has called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; <sup>31</sup> "and He has *filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom and understanding, in knowledge and all manner of workmanship*, <sup>32</sup> "to design artistic works, to work in gold and silver and bronze, <sup>33</sup> "in cutting jewels for setting, in carving wood, and to work in all manner of artistic workmanship. <sup>34</sup> "And He has put in his heart the ability to teach, *in him and Aholiab the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan.* <sup>35</sup> "He has *filled them with skill to do all manner of work* of the engraver and the designer and the tapestry maker, in blue, purple, and scarlet *thread*, and fine linen, and of the weaver-- those who do every work and those who design artistic works.”

Have you ever seen those listed as gifts? Probably not. They are distinguished as skills, or talents – “ordinary” gifts. Is the gift of teaching *spiritual*, or *ordinary*? Notice that teaching is described as a gift in Exo 35.34. Is it spiritual because God “fills” us with it by His Spirit? Or is it spiritual only when it is used for spiritual ends? See? Interpretation is rarely cut and dried.

## COMPARISONS

Whether we see the word “like” (which indicates a simile), or we have an image of something like a mother hen (which indicates a metaphor), it is a sign to help us better understand the thing that it signifies. This is ancillary to whether a verse is literal or figurative (Rule 8). In a simile, there are only some aspects that are the same, while others are not. In a metaphor, the more you explore the image, the more you learn about what it signifies. Parables are similes and not metaphors. So only some things are important – there is one main point to be drawn from it. Other things in the parable are “window dressing” to help drive the story.

**Luke 19:22** He said to him, 'I will condemn you with your own words, you wicked servant! You knew that I was a severe man [*variously translated austere, tough, hard*], taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow?

Is Christ hard, harsh, and tough? Or is he rather tender-hearted and merciful? Is he harsh towards his enemies and loving towards his own? Is He always so? Is the master in this parable to be taken as the emblem of Christ in all respects, or only in some respects? You need to determine that before you can interpret the parable correctly. Is the emphasis the sin of the servant, or the personality of the master? Begin there. Many mistakes are made by treating parables like metaphors, where everything in it reflects some spiritual truth that we are to assign to God or to ourselves. It is likewise a mistake to treat a simile as comprehensive, rather than suggestive.

### ***Other Principles***

(from A.W. Pink - modernized)

**Plain Sense** – God’s commandment “is exceedingly broad” (Psa. 119.96). Human language becomes invested with a fuller and richer meaning when it is used by God, than when we use it. Spiritualizing Old Testament prophecies doesn’t invest them a meaning that wasn’t meant to be there; and it doesn’t depart from their plain sense without an reason. For example, the Hebrew word “almah” can mean either “virgin” or “maiden,” as in this prophecy:

**Isa 7:14** "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the *virgin* shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.

The prophet's wife was indeed a young woman, and she gave birth to a son by him (Isa 8.3) – it was not a “virgin birth” *per se*. But neither was that child named “Immanuel.” Instead the Lord commanded that this child be named Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. Nonetheless, in Mat 1.23 we have Isa 7.14 quoted as a prophecy of Mary’s virgin birth; and the text (vv. 20, 25) makes it clear that Mary had never been with a man. And so grammar is not the controlling rule in such cases; rather, it is the interpretation of Scripture, *by Scripture*: that’s **Rule 2**. What seems plain to us, grammatically, and even contextually, may not be so plain in God’s use of His Word.

**Literalism** – (**Rule 8**) Where the *literal* sense of a verse violates any of the commandments of the Law, its words must be regarded *figuratively*. This is because one part of the Word will never contradict another part. For example, the seventh commandment not only prohibits the physical act of adultery, but it also prohibits all mental impurity (Mat 5.28). So too, the sixth commandment not only forbids taking a life, but it also forbids any deliberate maiming of our body, or a neighbor’s body. Therefore, no man can, without sin, pluck out his eye or cut off his hand – even though Jesus says to pluck out an eye or cut off a hand that causes you to sin (Mat 5.29-30). The literal meaning *cannot* be taken literally, without violating a commandment of the Law.

**Exceptions** – An exception always affirms the *contrary* to what is denied in the rule, or else it denies what is affirmed in the rule. The commandment, "You shall not steal," affirms that property rights are to be respected, boundary markers are not to be moved, what is borrowed must be returned. If that were not true, it would deny property rights, the need for truth-telling, and the value of hard work. We would labor in vain (1Cor 15.58). "Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with *his* hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need." (Eph 4:28 <sup>NKJ</sup>)

**Inclusions** –

FIRST, when God forbids one sin, He prohibits all sins of the same kind at the same time, with all its causes and any occasions for committing it. Therefore, adultery being forbidden, so are all opportunities that might undermine the sanctity of marriage, or give an appearance of impropriety.

SECOND, a curse is attached to the breach of any commandment, whether it is specifically expressed or not.

"If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food,<sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what *does it* profit?" (Jam 2:15 <sup>NKJ</sup>)

There is no curse here, only a lament. And yet Jesus said,

"Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me." (Mat 25:41-43 <sup>NKJ</sup>)

THIRD, where any vice is condemned, the opposite virtue is required. And so, where murder is prohibited, protecting and aiding life is required of us.

**Universal language** – Universal affirmations and negations ("all" and "none") should not always be understood universally (**Rule 4**). They are limited by their occasions, circumstances, and the matter being addressed. The apostle said, "I have been *all* things to *all* men, so that I might by *any* means save *some*" (1Cor. 9.22). If his language was taken without any limitation, it would signify that he became a blasphemer to blasphemers, a murderer to murders, etc. His statement must be restricted to things that are inconsequential and innocent, things in which Paul yielded to the weakness of others. In the same way, when Christ said, "Do not swear at all," His obvious meaning (according to what follows) is not to swear blasphemously, needlessly, or by any mere created thing. It does not apply to oaths in a court of law, for example.

**Prohibitions** – When anything is prohibited in one passage, but allowed in another, obviously it is not that particular thing in itself that's at issue, but some particular mode, cause, end, or reason that intended. So in Matthew 5.34, swearing is forbidden; but in other passages it is allowed, and examples are given. Therefore, it can't be swearing in itself that is prohibited; but evil and needless swearing is condemned in the one, and swearing in righteous causes or for just ends is approved in the other.

#### CONCLUSION

Books on biblical interpretation abound, and rules of interpretation continue to proliferate, and conflict with each other. I provided ten basic rules at the beginning to keep it simple for you, and those should suffice for most of your needs. I hope the examples were helpful. I added some additional "principles" because they come up a lot. But they are used more in the application of Scripture, than to interpret it ("what should I desire, what should I stay away from"). But they actually fall under one or another of those ten rules, as I indicated for a couple of them.

As you continue to study the Word of God, these rules will become increasingly useful, familiar, and I pray, *fruitful*, as you follow after our Lord Jesus Christ.