

The Ten Commandments of Bible Interpretation

The following rules of proper Bible interpretation have been gleaned from several different works of theology. There is little, if any, disagreement among scholars from different denominations on these rules, though they may be worded or combined in a slightly different manner. These rules could be considered universal among God's people from the time of the reformation until the present. They existed from the first century until the present, but for the first 1500 years of Christianity, scholars were learning to articulate them.

1. Study a phrase or idea in its total context.

For example, if you think you see a "truth" in a Scripture or two, go back and read the whole chapter that it is found in. Or, perhaps, read the whole book, paying particular attention to the first few verses which often tell WHO the book is written to. There will also be clues within the chapter, and book about WHAT the subject matter is about. The context will usually give clues as to the WHEN as well. Does this apply now, as it did when written? (See law no. 8). Ask, "Does this have a primary application to me today, or a secondary application, or none at all?" Examples: We can eat pork today, yet there are Scriptures that say not to. Why? Because they only apply to the nation of Israel under their dietary law. Does this have any application to us? Yes, a secondary application. We ask, "What is God teaching ME here?" Answer: God gave Israel the peculiar dietary laws, for one reason, to make them different than the world. This is called the Doctrine of Separation. We are to "Come out from among them and be separate...." We are not to be like the world, or of the world. The passage would not have a primary application to us, but a secondary, spiritual application. We do not have to keep the Jews' dietary laws, but we can learn the principle of separation from the powerful object lesson. Another example of where we need to ask "who is being spoken to" would be where Paul is speaking to Jewish believers (sometimes Jews within a mix of Gentile and Jewish believers) who did not believe God would save Gentiles. Paul says (in many places, as does John), "Jesus died for all men." When found in this context, this word "all" means he died for all *kinds* of men, i.e. Jews, Gentiles, every race, every color, some from each group of humanity will be saved. It does not mean "all" in the sense that all individuals would be ransomed and saved. The Greek word "pas" ("all" in English) does not always mean "every individual" but often means "all kinds of" or "some from many or all groups." (See point No. 2 below). Jesus Himself said all would NOT be saved (i.e. "...Few there be that enter through the straight gates.") He says "I gave my life for my sheep." (Not the goats!)

"I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep." John 10:11
"As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep." John 10:15

Jesus also said:

For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.” Mark 10.45

Another example would be in **2 Peter 3:9** The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. If we ask “who is this written to,” we look at the first verse in the chapter and the first verse in the book of 2 Peter, and we find it is written to Christians, i.e. saved people, not to the world. With this in mind, it means, “God is not willing that any of His sheep should perish.” It is a lesson on eternal security. It is only written “to them who have obtained like precious faith,” to the “beloved.” It is not teaching that God is not willing that any HUMAN should perish, for if this were true, then no human WOULD perish. Unless, that is, humans are more powerful than God’s will, which is nonsense. Only by asking WHO is this passage speaking to, will one get the proper interpretation. This is always important.

2. Use proper rules of grammar and proper definitions in both the original and the English.

Ex. Can the word “many” (as in Mark 10.45) ever mean “all”?

Ex. Can the word “all” (as in 1 Ti. 2.6) ever mean “many” rather than “all”?

“Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.” 1 Ti. 2.6

3. Consider the historical and ethnic backgrounds. (It often helps to understand idiomatic expressions used in the day the passage was written, or written about.)

ex. Matt. 24.⁷For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places. ⁸All these *are* the beginning of sorrows.

“Beginning of sorrow” means “birth pangs.” This was an idiomatic expression among first century Jews.

4. Let the Bible Interpret the Bible.

The part must fit the whole. The whole must support the part. God cannot contradict Himself.

There are no isolated doctrines. A true doctrine will be found in more than one place in the Bible and each citing will shed light on others.

No interpretation which contradicts clear teachings in other portions of Scripture, rightly interpreted, can be correct.

Another aspect of this is that the N.T. teaches in two places that the O.T. is useful in expanding our understanding of details and colors of meaning of the N.T. doctrines. The O.T. stories are physical stories which teach spiritual truths. It is a blessing to search for these spiritual truths in the object lessons, or types, of the O.T.

Romans 15:4

4 For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.

1 Corinthians 10:11

11 Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.

Ensample

τυπικῶς *typikōs*; a type

From Tupos = a mark, impression, or stamp left by a die.

5. Use a literal/plain interpretation, except where the passage clearly indicates that figures of speech or symbolism is being used.

The exception would be when the Scripture itself says, or the context strongly implies, that figurative language is being used in a particular passage. Plain figures of speech are commonly used in all literature, and are usually obvious to an experienced reader. The same is true in the Bible. For example, when the Scripture says Jesus is “the door” this is a figure of speech which means you must go through Him to get to the Father. When it says we are “sheep” this means the sheep has qualities which picture the spirit of a Christian, i.e. meek, and in need of a Shepherd (Christ Himself).

6. Use the clear to interpret the difficult, and NEVER visa versa.

7. Desire the true sense of each passage, rather than your comfortable and emotional “doctrinal box.” Be willing to lay aside a long held position, if it can be seen clearly by yourself that it does not fit your current understanding of the whole of the Bible. Desire the true sense of each passage, rather than what you already have in your mind due to creeds, doctrines, or ideas found in the books of men, or the beliefs of your group or denomination, or your momma.

“Never allow your theology to make you be unscriptural!” Think about it.

8. Consider the dispensational aspects of the whole Bible, when interpreting a particular passage. “Rightly divide the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15)

It is good to ask the question, “How did the cross change things?”

9. Study each passage, first from God’s view point, rather than the human view point.

10. Have no private interpretations.

2 Peter 1. ²⁰Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. ²¹For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake *as they were* moved by the Holy Ghost.

Private

ἰδιος idios; *one’s own, distinct; pertaining to self*

The writings of other men are only beneficial to the extent that they follow scripture. However, when they do, it is good to know what faithful people of God from other generations have said about certain passages. Where good men disagree, then this may mean that God has not yet revealed to man a clear understanding of certain “difficult” passages. Watch to see if events and the passage of time may give clearer understanding to this generation. However, in these situations, one must be VERY careful to apply Law No. 4, and all the other Laws as well.

Remember a prophet can never contradict another prophet, and a true interpretation will never contradict another portion of Scripture.

1 Cor 14.32 And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. 33 For God is not *the author* of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints.

I have found that two believers, who are willing to agree to be totally open-minded with respect to seeing what the Bible says, not what man says; to NOT be influenced by the peer pressure of their group, denomination or local church; to NOT look at truth through the sieve of man-made books they have already read concerning doctrines; and to care ONLY for the truth; and who will agree to never cheat when looking at a passage, but only use the above 10 rules religiously and in every case—the beliefs of these two Christians will merge and approach total agreement as they study together over time.

Their prayer must be...

Psalm 119:133–135

133 Order my steps in thy word: And let not any iniquity have dominion over me.

134 Deliver me from the oppression of man: So will I keep thy precepts.

135 Make thy face to shine upon thy servant; And teach me thy statutes.

Their attitude must be...

Jeremiah 10:23–24

23 O LORD, I know that the way of man *is* not in himself: *It is* not in man that walketh to direct his steps.

24 O LORD, correct me, but with judgment; Not in thine anger, lest thou bring me to nothing.

Their desire must be...

Psalms 119:103–106

103 How sweet are thy words unto my taste! *Yea, sweeter* than honey to my mouth!

104 Through thy precepts I get understanding: Therefore I hate every false way.

105 NUN. Thy word *is* a lamp unto my feet, And a light unto my path.

106 I have sworn, and I will perform *it*, That I will keep thy righteous judgments.

May your whole, complete, pure, resolute desire be to simply know the truth, and fear no man.

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