

Introduction:

One of the best books I've ever read is **How to Read a Book** by Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren. I recommend it to anyone who is a serious reader. But I always joke when I recommend it that the title makes me wonder if I can even read the book if I haven't yet read it. The title itself demonstrates that reading is really a skill. Further, it is more than simply being able to decode the symbols on the page. Serious reading takes thought and work. And it is that way for any book, including the Bible.

Regrettably, a lot of us look at the Bible as if it is an unfathomable book that only the professionally trained can really make heads or tails of. For centuries that was the official position of the visible church in Europe. One of the greatest gifts the Reformation brought to bear in religious history was the reintroduction of the Scripture to every person. We are now covered up with Bibles in language we can all understand. Yet, many of us subconsciously revert back to that old position. Only the trained can really understand it. Not so. But it takes more than just having a copy in your hand for it to be accessible. As Adler and Van Doren recognized, to get the greatest benefit out of reading any book, we need some direction; we need to get some direction on how to read the Bible. In fact, **II Timothy 2:15** exhorts us to work hard to handle the Word of Truth properly. With that in mind, I'd like to share five simple rules to help you read and study your Bible.

These are not special rules as if the Bible is somehow different than every other book. They are common sense.

Discussion:

I. Rule #1: Keep every scripture in context.

- A. We must not take any word, verse, or passage out of its context. Taking something in context means to take it "with text." That is, we determine its meaning based on the text around it. Why? As some have said, we can teach anything we want out of the Bible. For instance, the Bible says in **Psalms 14:1**, "There is no God."
- B. As we apply this very simple rule of Bible study, we will do two things. We first examine the *immediate context*. What does the Bible say in the text around the phrase? We secondly examine the *remote context*. That is, we consider what the Bible says on this subject in other passages. In this case, we remember **Genesis 1:1**. The Bible begins with the existence of God. Certainly no verse would contradict that. In the immediate context, we see that this is actually a quote from one called a fool. The Bible does not support atheism.
- C. One caveat. This is not to say that the only possible point to make from a passage is the one point the author meant in context. But it does mean that any point we make from a passage must be consistent with the passage in its biblical context. For example, in **I Corinthians 6:9-11** the main point in context is that we used to be unrighteous, but we aren't anymore, having been washed and sanctified by Jesus. Therefore we should not seek counsel for problem resolution from the unrighteous. However, while it is not Paul's point, it is perfectly consistent with the context to learn from this passage what is often taught from it. That is, we should teach the gospel to any and everyone. We have no idea how they will respond.

II. Rule #2: Use the sum of scriptures, not just one passage.

- A. We must use the sum of scripture to determine what God says on a topic. As **Psalms 119:160** says, "The sum of Your word is truth..." (ESV). We cannot base our views on one passage.
- B. For instance, the one verse known by more people than any other is **John 3:16**. Many base all their ideas regarding God's nature and character on this verse. Additionally, many base their entire concept of salvation on it. However, we need to read passages that define love (**I Corinthians 13:4-7; I John 4**) and belief (**John 3:36; Hebrews 11; James 2**). We need to read passages that describe God's multi-faceted character (**Romans 11:22**) and broader teaching about salvation (**Romans 10:9-10; Acts 2:38**). Use the sum of scripture, not just one passage.

III. Rule #3: Keep the scriptures in harmony.

- A. Paul pointed out that what he taught was not contradictory, saying both "No," and "Yes," at the same time (**II Corinthians 1:17-19**). Further, Paul told the Corinthians that he taught the same thing everywhere (**I Co-**

rinthians 4:17). God's message, no matter who is speaking or to whom, is consistent, unified, and harmonious. Therefore, if our understanding of one passage contradicts our understanding of another, we are making a mistake somewhere.

- B. We must learn not to jump on shallow interpretations of any passage without harmonizing it with everything we know about other scriptures. For instance, we go back to **John 3:16**. We have to harmonize it with **Romans 10:9-10** and **Acts 2:38**. One passage says we need to believe, another says we need to believe and confess, still yet another says we have to repent and be baptized for the remission of our sins. These passages are not to be argued against one another. Rather, we must see how they fit together. They fit together when we understand that the faith of which Jesus spoke in **John 3:16** is not just mental assent, but is true conviction, completed by obedience such as confession, repentance, and baptism (**James 2:22**).

IV. Rule #4: Allow the simple to define the complex.

- A. Study is a growth process (**I Peter 2:2; Hebrews 5:12-6:3**). It works from simple and shallow to complex and deep. That being the case, we recognize that the complex and deep issues of Scripture will never come back to rewrite the foundational principles.
- B. There are several passages about which I am not convinced I know what they fully mean. However, with nearly all of them I am very convinced of things they cannot mean because of other simpler, straightforward passages. For instance, **Revelation 20:4** speaks of martyred saints reigning with Christ for 1000 years. I have some strong ideas regarding what this passage means. However, I am not convinced that I absolutely understand this verse or the entire chapter. Having said that, I am absolutely convinced of some things this chapter cannot be saying. It cannot be saying that Jesus is coming to the earth some time in our future to establish an earthly kingdom. Other passages forbid that interpretation. For instance, **John 18:36** said Jesus' kingdom was not of this world. **Mark 9:1** said some of those to whom Jesus was speaking would still be alive when His kingdom was established. **Colossians 1:13** said that Christians are already delivered into Christ's kingdom. Finally, **Revelation 1:9** said that John, along with his readers, were companions in the kingdom when he wrote the book of **Revelation**. He could not possibly be saying that the kingdom would be established thousands of years later. He must mean something else. Certainly, I continue to study **Revelation 20**, but allowing the simple to define the complex has helped me narrow the path a great deal.

V. Rule #5: Remember you are growing.

- A. We must keep this in mind when we come across passages that we are certain we still do not understand. Some Bible students come across difficult passages and decide that if they do not understand them, there must be no understanding them. They leave the faith, claiming the Bible cannot be trusted. If we are still growing, as **II Peter 1:5-11** demonstrates we must be, then we are going to find issues we do not understand. We must simply keep studying the Bible. The greater foundation developed by more study elsewhere will eventually answer our questions.
- B. We must also keep this in mind when we believe we have all the answers to any doctrinal questions already figured out. I have some pretty strong opinions regarding the meaning of **Job**, **Matthew 24**, anointing with oil in **James 5:14**, baptism of the dead in **I Corinthians 15:29** and blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. I have studied all of these issues repeatedly and I am certain that my present opinion on each one is correct. However, I thought my last opinion on each one of these was correct as well. If we ever forget that we are growing, we close ourselves off to being corrected in the areas where we might be wrong. Some areas, like the ones I have just mentioned, may not seem so critical. However, I have also studied the issue of baptism. I am absolutely certain I am right on it. I would stake my soul on it and everyone else's. But I also thought that when I disagreed with what I now believe.
- C. I am not saying we should never take a stand on issues. We must take our stands based on what we believe the Bible teaches right now. We cannot make decisions based on what we might believe 10 years from now or even 10 days from now. However, we must always approach our Bibles freshly, recognizing we might be wrong. If we are right, the fresh look will only prove it to us again. If we are wrong, only the fresh look and willingness to grow will ever let us learn what is right.

Conclusion:

If we are going to use the proper standard properly and honestly, we have to follow these rules. Otherwise, we will simply promote confusion and division. God's Word was not given to us to confuse us or divide us. Rather, it was given to save us. As Paul said in **Acts 20:32**, God's Word, when used properly, will build us up and give us an inheritance among the sanctified. Let us pray that we always use God's standard properly.