

Three Rules That Don't Seem Right

Throughout my school years I had to memorize numerous rules I never completely understood. For example, why must I lie down instead of lay down for a nap? But there is a grammatical rule that governs such statements even if I don't know it.



I have found, however, a few truly useful rules for successful living—but they just don't seem right. In fact, they appear at first glance to be flat out wrong because they conflict with our “common sense.”

The first one over the line does not win the prize.

In a race, the winner is the one who gets to the finish line first—unless he's disqualified for an infraction of the rules.

Rules are important, and we need to understand them.

Who was the strong man, David or Goliath? Goliath, of course, who stood taller than nine feet and had been a warrior since his youth. His opponent? A mere shepherd boy who couldn't even wear a man's armor. But Goliath's bulk and formidable array of weaponry proved no match for David's confidence, inspired and backed up by the name of the Lord God of Hosts. If bets had been taken that day, they would all have been on the strong man who lost. “The race is not to the swift, or the battle to the strong.” (Eccl 9:11).

So if the first one over the finish line doesn't win the prize, then who does? “Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial, for once he has been approved (by God), he will receive the crown of life....” (James 1:12). Eternal prizes go to those who persevere despite obstacles and sidetracks. There are no shortcuts to maturity, and neither strength nor speed decide the winner.

Perfect conditions do not yield fruit.

Perfect conditions seldom occur, and “he who watches the wind does not sow, and he who watches the clouds does not reap.” (Eccl 11:10). If we wait until conditions are “just right,” we won't ever attempt anything.

When the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, they were led by God into the wilderness where they were three days without water. When the water they finally found at Marah was bitter, great complaints arose against Moses. Moses cried out to God, and following His instructions, tossed a certain tree into the water, causing the bitter water to become sweet. (Exodus 15:22-27).

Thus satisfied, sustained and nourished with sweet water, the people moved on. They camped next at Elim, an excellent spot with 12 wells of water and 70 palm trees. What could have been better? But the great work of God was done at the bitter waters; there is no miracle recorded at Elim, where conditions were perfect.

Out of the hard spots in life grow powerful testimonies, towering strength, clear insight. Perfect conditions don't produce that kind of fruit.

Being right is not enough.

Stated differently, the truth is never sufficient in itself. We do need to be right and have a firm grip on truth—but there's more.

On occasion I assemble the ingredients for a chocolate pie on my counter. Tasted individually, however, they are disgusting. Bitter cocoa powder, chalky flour—and there's no way I'd eat a raw egg! But in the proper proportions and cooked for the right amount of time, the result is really quite tasty.

I've been around numerous churches and individuals who were right in their teaching and doctrine, but they had neither significant influence nor power. Why not? An essential ingredient was missing from the mix.

Paul explains this way: “That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ.” (Ephesians 4:14-15, emphasis added). Truth does not prevail unless mixed with love.

In evaluating my various roles in life—husband, father, grandfather, teacher, leader—I draw one conclusion: I've been right a lot more times than I've been effective.

I've preached too much and prayed too little, loved too little, had too little compassion, overlooked too few wrongs done to me, forgiven too little. Indeed I was right—yet ineffective. Truth doesn't stand alone.

The important rules that govern our lives are sometimes veiled in darkness. But God waits to throw back the shutters and flood us with light—if we'll ask Him. (James 1:5).

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