



UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE

How Read and Interpret the Bible

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE OF THE BIBLE

We all use figures of speech in our own language. When we say, “This is cool,” the meaning is clear to us and we recognize immediately the point of reference. In Biblical figures of speech, the relevant point of comparison was obvious to the original hearers or readers. Because we may not be familiar with Biblical customs we cannot push the figure of speech beyond that point.

1. Literal refers to what a word or phrase means in its ordinary, customary usage. Figurative refers to the meaning of a word or expression when it is compared to something else. This is called an analogy.
 - What does the analogy in John 6:53 mean where Jesus said that He is the bread of life?
2. Jesus taught through SIMILES, comparisons explicitly stated with words such as “like” or “as.”
 - Luke 10:1-3 *...behold, I send you out as lambs among wolves.*
 - Matthew 24:27 *For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.*
 - Other
3. A METAPHOR is a figure of speech, common in the Bible, in which the writer describes one thing in terms of something else.
 - Luke 12:32 *Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*
 - Other
4. ANTHROPOMORPHISM is a metaphor in the Old and New Testament which describes God’s power in terms human body parts and movements.
 - Isaiah 59:1 *Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear.*
 - Other
5. Another type of metaphor is known as ANTHROPOPATHISM and is used to ascribe to God human emotions, feelings, and responses.
 - God does have these emotions but His responses and emotions are perfect and not tainted by human sinful responses. When dealing with these passages we must remove self-centeredness that is so often a part of our emotions. Examples are God’s grief in Genesis 6:6; His wrath in John 3:36; Revelation 14: 10 and 15:1,7.
 - Other

6. WORDS OF ASSOCIATION are substitutions that are well known in the language of the reader.
 - Ehraim, a tribe of Israel, is often used to refer to northern Israel after the division into southern and northern kingdoms. We use the term, “the White House” to refer to the presidency of the United States.

7. In PERSONIFICATION, personal qualities are given to an object or an idea.
 - Psalm 114:3-4 *The sea saw it and fled; Jordan turned back. The mountains skipped like rams, the little hills like lambs.*
 - Matthew 6:34 *Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.*
 - Other

8. EUPHEMISM is a type of understatement often used in the Bible. It is a substitution of a more indirect or delicate term for a blunt one that may be offensive or distasteful.
 - Genesis 4:1 *Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, and said, “I have acquired a man from the Lord.”* (Leviticus 18:6)
 - Dysphemism is the opposite of a euphemism, such as Beelzebub “lord of the flies” for Beelzebul “Baal the prince.”
 - Other

9. HYPERBOLE is the conscious exaggeration of a truth, usually to stress a point. Although Jesus used this often, not every instance is easily recognized. Each passage must be taken in its context.
 - Matthew 5:29-30 *If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.*
 - Other

10. In IRONY, the writer or speaker means exactly the opposite of what the words say. This is a vivid tool in writing, but since we cannot see the writer or hear the tone of voice, careful study of the context is necessary.
 - God is ironic when he asks Adam, in the Garden of Eden “where are you?” Asking a question implies that the speaker needs the information, but God knew where Adam was...He was saying “I don’t know where you are” while actually communicating “I know why you are trying to hide.”
 - 1 Kings 18:27 *And so it was, at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, “Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened.”* (Jeremiah 34:17)
 - In Matthew 23 Jesus pronounced a long list of judgment against the Pharisees and leaders as He said, “Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers’ guilt.”
 - Other

PARABLES AND ALLEGORIES

1. A PARABLE is a short fictional story that teaches a lesson by comparison and usually focus on only one point. Notice the list included at the end of the notes.

- Many of Jesus' parables focused on the Kingdom of God, the Sovereign rule of God.
 - What is Paul teaching in Romans 14:14-18 when he said, "...for (after all,) the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."
2. An ALLEGORY is a story or teaching that is meant to convey a figurative meaning. It often involves several comparisons in which each element of the story or teaching stand for something specific. Examples include...
 3. Here are some of the differences.
 - A. In a parable, words are used literally while allegories use words figuratively.
 - B. A parable has ONE point while an allegory may have several points.
 - C. In a parable the story is true to life while allegories blend fictional (imaginary) and non-fictional (true to life).
 - D. Unlike a parable, imagery (word pictures) in allegories are identified with the story and usually explain why they are included in the story.

PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING PARABLES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

1. Try to understand the earthly details as well as the original hearers did. Many of Jesus' stories were taken from the agrarian life of the day.
2. Note the attitude and spiritual condition of the original hearers. Was He speaking to disciples and followers or religious leaders?
3. If possible, note the circumstances that prompted the parable.
4. A parable has ONE MAIN POINT.
 - A. State the point of the parable and give reasons for your selection. If several of the details are explained, try to uncover the main emphasis.
 - B. Try to relate that point to the Reign of the Kingdom of God. Matthew 13:10-11 *And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven,..."*
 - C. Relate the main point or emphasis first to the readers of that time, then discover the contemporary application for us.

PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING ALLEGORIES

1. State as explicitly as possible who the original hearers were and note why the allegory was told.

2. Try to see the basic points of comparison stressed by the original writer.
3. List all the points of comparison and the things for which they stand. State why these truths were important then and why they are important now.
4. An example of an allegory in the Old Testament is Proverbs 5:15-19 which addresses marital faithfulness by urging a man to “drink of his own cistern” and no one else’s. We are told the allegory’s meaning in verses 20-23 where the commandment is repeated in plain language.
5. Allegories are also found in the New Testament. Well known allegories include: Christ as the Good Shepherd in John 10:1-16, the Last Supper in Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 21:14-23, and Paul’s illustration of God’s armor to be worn in our war in the spirit in Ephesians 6:10-17.
 - More examples are found in the list of parables and allegories.
6. Difficulties arise with allegories when we interpret beyond the explanation given in the Bible and insist on our own interpretation, such as the allegorizing of the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 by Origen (185 –254 AD) and Augustine (354 - 430 AD). This is Origen’s interpretation (which does NOT follow correct exegetical rules).
 - The man who was going down to Jericho is Adam. Jerusalem is paradise, and Jericho is the world. The robbers are hostile powers (the flesh and the demonic). The priest is the Law, the Levite is the prophets, and the Samaritan is Christ. The wounds are disobedience, the beast is the Lord’s body, the inn, which accepts all who wish to enter, is the Church. The manager of the inn is the head of the Church to whom its care has been entrusted. And the Samaritan promises he will return represents the Savior’s Second Coming.

EXEGETICAL EXERCISE | PARABLES

Parables are powerful picture lessons taken from everyday life to prove a point. The Lord taught His disciples through parables that made the teaching easier to understand. However, sometimes He used parables to make a sharp rebuke to those who opposed Him. The prophet Nathan used a parable in a similar way to convince King David of his sin in 2 Samuel 22:1-15.

The parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37

The parable of the two sons in Matthew 21:28-32

1. Read Luke 10:25-37 or Matthew 21:28-32 at least twice, noting the finer points, nuances, etc. Then answer the following questions.
2. Describe the events that surround the parable.

3. What prompted Christ to speak the parable and to whom was the parable spoken?

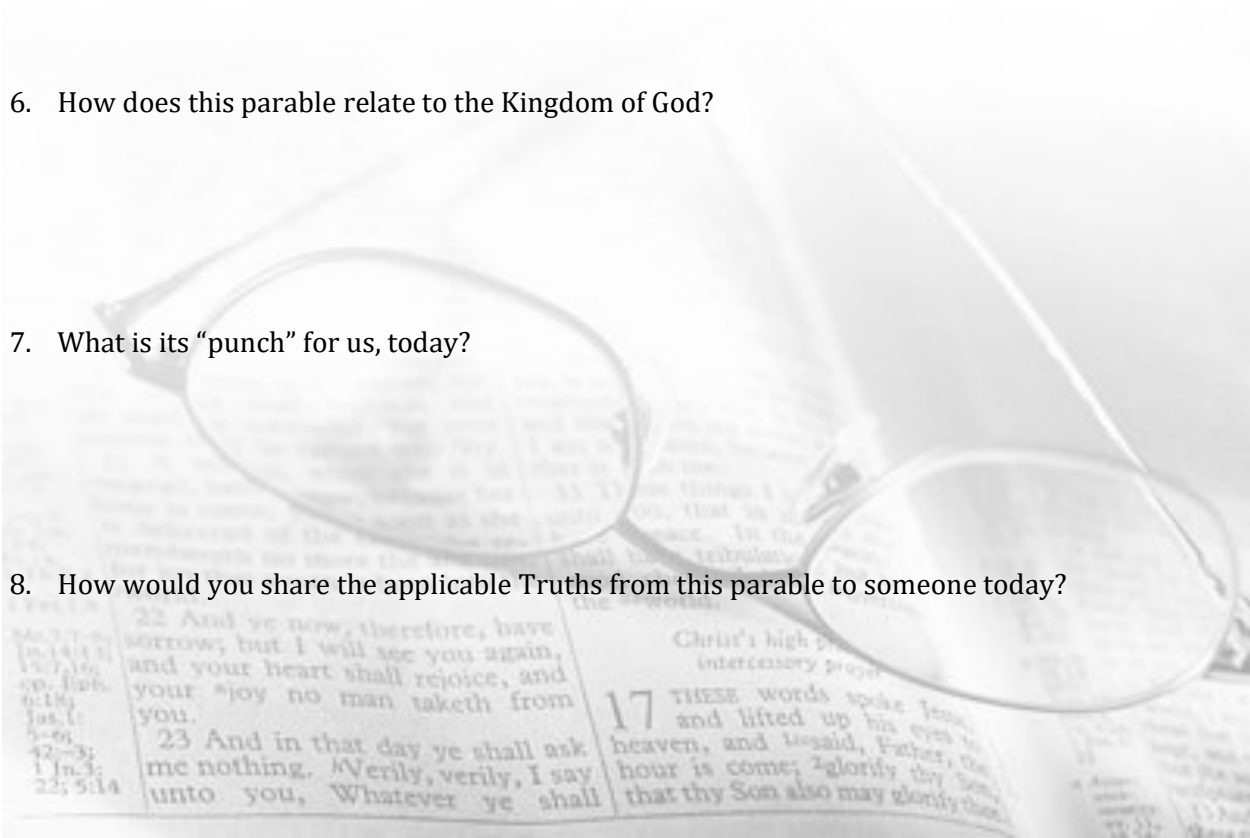
4. What are the facts of the parable itself?

5. What would Jesus have wanted the original hearers to “catch” from this?

6. How does this parable relate to the Kingdom of God?

7. What is its “punch” for us, today?

8. How would you share the applicable Truths from this parable to someone today?



PARABLES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

1. The strongman (Matthew 12:25-29)
2. The Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 13:11)
3. The Sower and the 4 Soils (Matthew 13:3-9,18-23)
4. The Wheat and Tares (Matthew 13:24-30,36-43)
5. The Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32)
6. The Leaven (Matthew 13:33)
7. The Hidden Treasure (Matthew 13:44)
8. The Pearl of Great Price (Matthew 13:45-46)
9. The Dragnet (Matthew 13:47-50)
10. The Householder (Matthew 13:51-52)
11. The Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:21-35)
12. The Laborers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16)
13. The Two Sons (Matthew 21:28-32)
14. The Wicked Vinedressers (Matthew 21:33-46)
15. The Wedding Feast (Matthew 22:1-14)
16. Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13)
17. The Talents (Matthew 25:14-30)
18. The Growing Seed (Mark 4:26-29)
19. The Two Debtors (Luke 7:41-43)
20. The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)
21. The Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:1-13)
22. The Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21)
23. The Barren Fig Tree (Luke 13:6-9)
24. Taking the Lowest Place (Luke 14:7-11)
25. The Great Supper (Luke 14:15-24)
26. The Lost Sheep (Luke 15:1-7)
27. The Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10)
28. The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)
29. The Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-15)
30. The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)
31. The Unprofitable Servants (Luke 17:7-10)
32. The Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1-8)
33. The Pharisee and Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14)
34. The Minas or Talents (Luke 19:11-27)

WELL KNOWN ALLEGORIES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

1. The Good Shepherd (John 10:11-18)
2. The Vine and the Branches (John 15:1-11)
3. The Last Supper (Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 21:14-23)
4. Paul as the Builder (1 Corinthians 13:10-15)
5. The Armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-17)