

Metaphors, Allegories, Similes and Parables

The Bible uses all the above. It is important that we understand the proper use of these. The Bible is the Word of God and we need to understand what it says and also, what it is not saying. Therefore, it is important to understand the correct use of metaphors, allegories, similes and parables.

Metaphor is a comparison between two things that are basically unlike. The things are implied rather than expressed.

Luke 13:32 “Go tell that fox...”

John 8:12 “I am the light...”

1 Corinthians 10:4 “...for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them...” (The pass goes on to tell us that Jesus is the rock.)

Allegory is an extended metaphor. The basic meaning is often given in the allegory but not always.

John 10

John 15

Simile is a comparison between two unlike things like a metaphor but the comparison is expressed with “as” or “like”.

2 Peter 3:8 “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years...”

Isaiah 53:6 “We all like sheep...”

John 1:32 “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove...”

Parable is a story giving some moral or spiritual truth. It is true to life but not usually an actual happening. It is called an extended simile. Parables usually have three parts setting, story, and application. Each parable has one main point. It is important not to interpret all the various details but to look for the central message. Although, there are exceptions: Matthew 13 – the Wheat and Tares; Matthew 20 – the Vineyard. But these are not the general rule and we should look for the main point.

Some false teachers will misuse a passage from the Bible making it say something by falsely using a metaphor, allegory, simile or parable. We can only use one of these when it is there we cannot simply use our imaginations to have the Bible say something we want it to say. e.g.

1. The Prodigal Son this is not a means of one getting back to God. If it were repentance would be sufficient for salvation and no need for Jesus’ death on the cross.

2. 2 Peter 3:8 This is a simile ‘1000 years is like a day’. It does not say a 1000 years equals a day. Yet that is exactly what a popular radio teacher on Family Radio does. He uses the equation of 1000 years = a day. Then takes a week (seven days before the Genesis’ flood) and gets 7000 years (1000x7=7000) and the date of Jesus’ Second Coming. May 21, 2011. (This passage, 2 Peter 3:8, is a simile not an equation, and this teacher with Family Radio

is entirely wrong, therefore, we should be very wary about following him.)

3. Another false teacher - Origen (2nd-3rd century A.D.) The Good Samaritan – Luke 10

Adam is the victim
Jerusalem is heaven
Jericho is the world
Robbers are the devil and his demons
Priest is the law
Levite is the prophets
Good Samaritan is Christ
The Beast is the Body of Christ
Inn is the church
2 denarri coin is the Father and the Son
Promise to come back is the Second Coming of Christ.

There is not a hint in the passage that Origen's interpretation is correct. He is simply using his imagination. Jesus gives a different interpretation. Again, we should be very wary about following him or anyone else who misuses God's Holy Word.

4. Also, notice how Satan uses God's Word. Matthew 4:1-11

Here Satan twist God's Word to use it to say something it does not say. Again, we need to be very, very wary of someone who uses God's Word for his own interpretation.

Some Guidelines

1. Think first of the story's natural meaning.
2. Note the occasion for giving the parable.
3. Find the main teaching - the central point
4. Check the meaning with the direct teaching of the Scripture.
5. Don't use metaphors, allegories, similes or parables for doctrine, but only to confirm and strengthen the doctrine that is given elsewhere in the Scripture.
6. If you have a problem in understanding, sometimes the historical and cultural background will give light to the correct interpretation.
e.g. The Wedding – the man is there without wedding garments and is judged severely for not wearing those provided by the host. This was the historical custom at that time.
7. Never allegorize or spiritualize a passage unless the Bible makes it crystal clear that you should. For if you allegorize or spiritualize it when it should not be you are simply interpreting the World of God with your imagination. You are either adding to God's Word or you are taking away from it. This is a great sin.

Sterrett , T. Norton, *How to Understand Your Bible*, 1974, Downers Grove, Illinois, InterVarsity Press See his book for more details in correctly interpreting the Scriptures.