

3. Special Rules for Studying the Bible

With a base of “general” rules established, we will now build on that with specific areas of the Bible that have their own unique set of guidelines or “rules” for correct interpretation. We will consider five—parable, parallelism, proverb, prophecy, and narrative.

1) Parables

- Before we get any farther, we need to understand that a parable is a figure of speech making a comparison (see pp. 39–40). It is a longer simile, with the story and its application usually separated.

Matt 13:24, 31, 44, 45, 47 “the kingdom of heaven is like...”

- Here are the special rules for interpreting parables—

- (1) Perhaps the most important rule when interpreting parables is that each has **one** main, central point, teaching, or idea. A parable may have other ideas involved in it, but such are subordinate to the main idea. Some examples of this (one main, central point):

Matt 13:1–9 Parable of the Sower

This shows the responses to the preaching of the Word during the absence of the King and the postponement of the Kingdom. This is the point of the parable.

Matt 13:24–30 Parable of the Tares

This shows the counterfeit, professing believers in the world during the absence of the King and the postponement of the Kingdom.

- (2) The second rule is that the **details** of a parable must be understood in relation to the one main, central point. Examples—

Matt 13:8 “yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty”

There is no real significance in the different amounts of fruit; Jesus doesn’t say anything about that. What is important—the one single, main point—is the positive response to the Word, represented by the good soil. The fruit-bearing is the evidence of that response (cf. Matt 8:20–21; the rocky place received the Word but bore no fruit).

Matt 13:25 “while his men were sleeping”

The point of the parable is *not* that men were sleeping; there is nothing significant about this. Men sleeping is a routine thing. Night is usually when an

enemy would do this kind of thing. “While men were sleeping” simply means “at nighttime.” The parable doesn’t blame the men for sleeping.

- (3) **Doctrine** should not be based primarily on parables. Examples—

Matt 13:5, 7

This does not teach that a believer can lose his salvation. Fruit bearing proves a positive and believing response to the Word, not how long before the plant dried up or was choked. The parable also isn’t teaching about a “carnal Christian” who stops growing and bearing fruit.

Matt 13:30

This does not teach that heretics should be allowed to remain in the church, as some evangelicals and others hold. The field here is the world (v. 38), not the church. It is impossible for believers to root out false professors of the world.

- (4) Note the **setting** of the parable—*where* in the gospel it is and *when* in history it’s central point occurs.
- (a) The setting usually gives the thrust or subject of the parable (or series of parables). The setting, which includes the original audience, will likely give the reason for the parable(s).
- (b) For example, the kingdom parables in Matthew 13 came right after the incident of the unpardonable sin, about 1 ½ years before the cross.
- (5) Relate the parable to Jesus’ teaching concerning the **kingdom**.
- (a) **Jesus’ use of parables.** Jesus’ parables were usually addressed to the crowds and/or the religious leaders of Israel. His teaching in parables had a two-fold purpose (Matt 13:10–13) – (1) To withhold truth from determined unbelievers, and (2) to encourage believers to inquire about truth. In response to the unpardonable sin, Jesus changed how He taught, from clear teaching to parables.
- (b) **Parables describe the plan of the kingdom, not its form.** Although many say that Jesus changed the form of the kingdom from Israel to the church, they explain different facets of the kingdom plan. These facets usually deal with the *postponement* of the kingdom and what life will be like while the King is *absent*.
- Remember what “mystery” (Matt 13:11) means in the NT—truth previously concealed but now presently revealed (cf. Eph 3:4–5).

2) Parallelism

- What is parallelism?

The type of literature (genre) that parallelism basically belongs to is [poetry](#). When used in poetry meaning is given in its balance of thought in a logical rhythm. The author follows one statement by another idea that is parallel with it in context.

- What are the types of parallelism?

(1) [Synonymous](#) – The second line says essentially the same thing as the first

Ps 1:5 The wicked will not stand in the judgment,
Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

Don't press the details between "wicked" and "sinners" and etc.

(2) [Contrasting](#) – The second line contrasts the first

Ps 1:6 The Lord knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish.

The word "but" usually characterizes this type of expression.

(3) [Completion](#) – The second line furthers or completes the first

Ps 1:3 He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,
Which yields its fruit in its season

The 2nd line is not a complete thought in itself; it completes the thought of the first line.

3) Proverb

- A proverb is a compact, memorable saying of practical truth. It usually deals with basic values, proper attitudes, and right actions.
- The genre, or type of literature, that a proverb belongs to is called wisdom literature, which deals with [skillfully](#) applying God's truth to life.
- Here are the special rules for interpreting proverbs—

(1) Note the [figurative](#) language that is used. Examples:

Prov 1:20; 8:1; 9:1 Wisdom is represented as a person

Prov 26:8 A comparison is made, showing absurdity

(2) Note the [context](#). Sometimes a theme is being addressed, so you must note that (such as adultery [5:1–23] or laziness [6:6–11])

- (3) Note **parallelism**. Meaning can be found in the parallel statement made in the proverb itself (Prov 26:17).
- (4) A proverb usually has a **single** principle. Usually a single point of comparison is made or truth given. Don't press the details, especially when figurative language is used. The single point is usually in the context, parallelism, or the statement itself.

Prov 31:14 “she is like merchant ships” is explained in the parallel clause, “she brings her food from afar.” The principle is that a wise woman goes to different places to get food; she is a good shopper.

Deut 25:4; cf. 1 Cor 9:9 “you shall not muzzle the ox” – this means that workers deserve to enjoy the fruits of their labor.

- (5) Proverbs are not legal **guarantees** from God and must therefore be understood in light of other biblical teaching.
- (a) **Balance** the proverb with other Scripture – it cannot contradict the clear teaching of Scripture. Remember, a proverb tells the *general* or *likely* outcome.

Prov 22:26–27 This could be taken to prohibit borrowing or making loans. It really means that debts should be cautiously incurred because foreclosure can be painful.

Prov 6:20 This could be taken to mean that children should always render absolute obedience to parents, even if the command was wrong or sinful. However, it is never right to sin (you may have to pay the price, though, as Shadrach and his friends did).

Prov 22:6; cf. Ezek 18 The doctrines of election and personal responsibility must balance this proverb. No one has a guarantee that he will have a Cain or Able, a Jacob or Esau.

- (b) Understand OT proverbs in its **historical** setting. When Israel was ruled by God-chosen kings, there were blessings and curses that would be realized in response to the Israelites' obedience or disobedience. For example—

Prov 3:9–10 “Honor the Lord from your wealth...so your barns will be filled with plenty.” If we “honor the Lord” with our finances, God will bless, but not necessarily in the same way.

- (c) Sometimes only a **general** or likely outcome is intended.

Prov 3:1–2

Prov 22:6