**Interpreting Bible Metaphors[[1]](#endnote-1)**

Biblical metaphors can be tricky to understand. What does it mean when Jesus says believers are “the salt of the earth?” How is God’s word a “lamp unto my feet?” In what way are our “sins like scarlet?” Many passages of Scripture uses metaphorical language to communicate truth.

If you are to understand the many metaphors used in Scripture, there are a few things that are important to remember in breaking them down. **Not everything in Scripture is a metaphor.** The first step is identifying what **is** and what **isn’t** a metaphor.

*Understanding how to interpret Biblical metaphors will increase the depth of your Bible study and decrease mistakes by taking a metaphor too far.*

**What is metaphor?**

**The Equation**

**A metaphor compares something you don’t know with something you do know.**In other words, you compare two completely different things to reveal something about one those things. Oftentimes, metaphors compare something abstract with something more concrete.

For example, “sin” is abstract, hard to understand. But when it is compared with “scarlet”, you can start to understand the word “sin” better. It is a stain. It is somehow related to the color of blood. (Isaiah 1.18 - *Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.*)

**Metaphor uses a simple equation: X = Y. X is something you don’t understand. Y is something you do understand.**By setting these two things in relation to each other, truth and reality are communicated more clearly.

People use metaphors on a daily basis. For example, when was the last time you said to someone “I see what you are saying?” That is a metaphor. You cannot literally “see” with your eyes words that someone speaks to you. You are using the metaphor “seeing = knowing”. “Knowing” is abstract. What does it mean to know something? But “seeing” is pretty easy to understand. You “see” things all the time. By making “seeing” equal to “knowing”, you better understand what “knowing” means.

*A metaphor is a way of communicating something difficult to understand*

*by using something easy to understand.*

*It takes characteristics of one thing and gives it to another.*

Why is this important? The Bible uses metaphors often. In parables, in proverbs, in poetry and in prophecy. **God has graciously chosen to reveal truth to us using metaphors. This makes the truth easier to grasp and understand.**

**Two Pitfalls to Avoid**

Remember: **Just because the Bible is full of metaphorical language does not mean every single passage is a metaphor.** Do not fall into the trap of spiritualizing and allegorizing every single text of Scripture. The Bible is full of enough obvious metaphors without you adding more to the text.

Understanding what a metaphor is and isn’t becomes important in passages like Galatians 4 where Paul compares the law and the promise to Ishmael and Isaac. Metaphors use real things. Paul is not saying Ismael and Isaac weren’t real people. He is comparing real people with real abstract truths (law and promise). **Metaphors takes one real thing and compares it with another real thing.**

**Another pitfall to avoid is taking the metaphor too far.** In the example of Isaiah 1.18 - *Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool,* it would not make sense to stretch the metaphor to mean that “sin” is a color as “scarlet” or “crimson” is. And that it would become *as wool* means *white as wool.* It would be a stretch to believe that sin is *fluffy* like wool.

**Steps for Understanding Biblical Metaphors Worksheet**

**Step 1: Set up the Equation**

On the top of the worksheet, there is a section to write down the metaphor and the Bible reference. Remember, a metaphor takes one real thing and explains it in terms of another real thing.

An example of a key metaphor is “The Lord is my Shepherd.” God is being compared with a shepherd and since you know God is not literally a shepherd, you should immediately recognize the Psalmist is using metaphorical language. Another example is “the fruit of the Spirit”. The Holy Spirit does not literally make believers into a fruit tree. Therefore, Paul is comparing the work of the Spirit to fruit metaphorically. In this case, you might write “Work of Spirit = fruit” at the top of the worksheet.

**Try to write the metaphor in the form of X = Y.**This helps to visualize what the metaphor is actually comparing. Instead of using an equation, you could also just write down the sentence in the text which contains the metaphor.

**Oftentimes, the first half of the sentence gives one part of the metaphor and the second half gives the other part of the metaphor.**That is the case in the metaphor “though your sins be like scarlet”. Sin is the first part of the metaphor, and scarlet is the second part.

**Step 2: Describe Characteristics**

After you write down the metaphor itself, the next part of the worksheet has you write down the characteristics of each half of the metaphor. Ask yourself **“What words would I use to describe the first half? What words would I use to describe the second half?”**

For “the Lord is my shepherd”, the first half of the metaphor is “the Lord” and the second half is “shepherd.” So first ask yourself “What words would I use to describe the Lord?” Write them down on one side of the worksheet. Normally shoot to have 3-5 different words. Next, ask “What words would I use to describe a shepherd?” and write them on the other side of the worksheet.

**The purpose of this step is simply to understand the components of the metaphor. If you don’t know what is being compared, you won’t be able to understand the significance of the comparison.**

For the metaphor “the fruit of the Spirit,” I would put “the Spirit” and “fruit.” Under “the Spirit” you might write “part of the Trinity,” “dwells inside believers”, and “empowers believers.” Then, under “fruit”, you might write “grows on a tree,” “sweet”, and “variety of different types.”

Once you are satisfied with your understanding of each half of the verse, move on to the next step.

**Step 3: Compare & Contrast**

Now that you understand each half of the metaphor, ask yourself “**How is the first half of the metaphor similar to the second half?”**In the worksheet, first write down the similarities between the two things before writing how they are different. One author says “a good metaphor is like a good detective story…its [complete] solution shouldn’t be immediately apparent in advance.”

**How is it Different?**

Make sure you write down a few things that are obviously *different,* so you don’t take the metaphor too far.

This step is where you “solve the mystery” so to speak. Once you think through the **similarities** between the two different things being compared, you start to understand what the metaphor is getting at. Every metaphor has strengths and weaknesses and at some point breaks down. This is why you ask in what ways the two parts of the metaphor are **different**: so you can see where the metaphor breaks down or where you could take the metaphor *too far.*

In the example of “the Lord is my shepherd,” the similarities you might write down are “the Lord cares for His people like a shepherd cares for his sheep,” or “the Lord provides for His people like a shepherd provides for his sheep,” or “the Lord leads His people like a shepherd leads his sheep.” Some obvious differences are the Lord does not have an occupation as a shepherd. Nor does God physically care for physical sheep.

In the example of “the fruit of the Spirit”, some similarities could be “the work of the Spirit in your life produces something like a tree produces fruit,” or “the Spirit produces positive effects in your life just like fruit is normally a tasty, positive thing.” Obvious differences are the work of the Spirit isn’t physical like fruit nor is it visible or consumable in the same way fruit is.

These are just brief examples. **Take your time on this step and do not rush.**This is where the real work for understanding biblical metaphors happens. T point of the metaphor will usually show itself clearly. Once you have written down the similarities and differences, you are ready to move on to the final step.

**Step 4: Succinctly Summarize**

You have found the metaphor, thought about the metaphor and possibly seen a depth in the metaphor you hadn’t seen before. Now, it is time to summarize what you’ve understood. Looking at the similarities and differences you found, try to answer this final question “**What truth is this metaphor trying to illustrate, clarify, or make memorable?”**Try to write one or two sentences at the most at the bottom of your worksheet.

For “the Lord is my shepherd” example, look back at all the similarities and differences. To summarize them all, you might write, “The Lord is our shepherd in that His people are completely dependent on Him, and He provides completely for His people.” That one sentence captures most of the similarities and avoids any of the differences.

In “the fruit of the Spirit” example one could summarize the similarities with, “The work of the Spirit is like fruit in that the Spirit produces a definite, good and visible effect in a believer’s life. There are a variety of good effects and they grow with time.” These two sentences capture the similarities of the work of the Spirit and fruit, and also incorporates a difference: the fruit of the Spirit should be visible, just not in the same way literal fruit is physically visible.

*The important takeaways: find the metaphor. Break it down into two halves.*

*Compare and contrast those two parts [without stretching the metaphor.*

*Then summarize your findings.*

**Now that you have your summary, you can see the metaphors importance in whatever text you are studying and you can also succinctly summarize your study to another believer.** You can also use the summary of the metaphor to start thinking through the applications it has to your life.

**Conclusion**

You now know how to do an in-depth study of a biblical metaphor. This type of method is incredibly useful for prophecy, parables, proverbs, and poetry in Scripture. Metaphorical language is also sprinkled throughout the Epistles. Understanding Biblical metaphors more clearly will take your Bible study to the next level...

1. Taken from 4 HELPFUL STEPS FOR BREAKING DOWN BIBLICAL METAPHORS By Adam Nesmith | March 17, 2021

https://theaveragechurchman.com/biblical-metaphors/ [↑](#endnote-ref-1)