

# Interpreting Scripture #4: Interpreting the New Testament

## INTRODUCTION

1. In this session we will examine three major genres from the New Testament: epistle, gospel, and parable.

## THE EPISTLES

Twenty-one of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament are epistles.

1. The Epistles are not theological treatises. They are letters written in response to specific circumstances.

The Epistles involve “Task Theology.” They apply truth to specific situations rather than stating it theoretically. Our challenge is that we do not know all of the circumstances surrounding a given letter. It is like listening to one end of a telephone conversation and trying to reconstruct what the other person is saying.

2. Therefore, to understand an epistle we must first try to understand the specific historical setting.

The following three steps will help us recreate the specific historical setting of an epistle.

- Read the book several times through, looking for information that sheds light on the audience, author, and occasion. Sometimes the information is obvious, and sometimes it is implied.
- Ask yourself many questions about the text (see Lesson One).
- Compare and enlarge your findings by consulting available biblical reference works.

You will learn more if you do your own research in the biblical text first before you consult outside resources.

3. Next, look for truths and principles embedded in the setting.

- Determine what circumstances are the same as our contemporary setting. If the specific circumstances are similar, God's word to us is the same as God's word was to them.

**For example, the spiritual relationship that Paul had with Philemon is still a part of our contemporary setting. Therefore, the attitude of respect, honor, and even deference that Paul showed toward Philemon is a model for all leaders today.**

- Determine what circumstances are different than our contemporary setting. Ask yourself what biblical principles are revealed in these circumstances.

**For example, it is unlikely that we will ever have to mediate between a runaway slave and his owner (who just happens to be one of the pastors of a church that we have apostolic authority over). However, we see in this unique historical setting many powerful principles concerning reconciliation and forgiveness.**

## **THE GOSPELS**

1. A Gospel is an account of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ arranged as a theological sermon and not as a biography.

**The Gospels are written in narrative form. Therefore, what was taught regarding Old Testament narratives is applicable here.**

2. The following guidelines will assist us in reading and understanding the Gospels.

- Each Gospel was written for a different audience. Therefore, it is helpful to compare parallel passages among the Gospels looking for the different issues and themes that the author emphasized.

**The first three Gospels are called the Synoptics because they are similar to one another in structure, content, and wording. The Synoptics emphasize Jesus's Galilean ministry and his public discourses, while John emphasizes His Judean ministry and private discourses.**

- The Gospels record material that is historical, but not always in chronological order. Therefore, it is helpful to pay attention to thematic construction as well as chronological sequence (often identified with words and phrases, such as: *the next day, after, immediately, before, during, day, week, etc.*
- The Gospel writers wrote within the cultural context of their day. Therefore, knowledge of the political, economic, and religious climate of first century Palestine contributes to our understanding of the Gospels.
- The Gospels view Jesus as the fulfillment of God's plan of redemption outlined in the history and covenants of the Old Testament. Therefore, we must interpret the Gospels in light of the Old Testament.

## THE PARABLES

1. A parable is a story that is true to life and teaches a spiritual lesson.
2. To understand a parable, look for the following:
  - Who is the audience? The setting of a parable often provides a key to understanding it.
    - Parables are especially designed to provoke a response from the listener. Try to put yourself in the place of the audience and hear what they heard from their perspective.

**Many parables have multiple audiences. Jesus spoke the parable of the Lost Sheep (Lk 15:1-7) to the Pharisees and scribes. But tax collectors and sinners as well as the disciples were also listening. The Pharisees and scribes were rebuked for their self-righteousness and contempt. The tax collectors and sinners were comforted to know that God loved them. And the disciples were challenged to seek and save the lost.**

- What is the main point?
  - Parables generally have one main point.

**There is a difference between the point of the parable and its application. A parable may have one point, but it can have many applications.**

- When a parable has multiple points, they are usually either obvious, or are explained in the text.

**For example, in the parable of the Four Soils (Mk 4:3-20) there is one primary point: the state of our heart determines how fruitful the Word will be. But there are other points that become clear when Jesus explains the parable later.**

- What are the relevant details?
  - The relevant details are those crucial to the point of the story. Not every detail in a parable is relevant. Some details merely add realism to the story.

**For example, in the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, the relevant details are those centered on the landowner, the man hired first, and the man hired last. The men hired at the third and sixth hour only provide realism.**

- Is there an unexpected twist that drives home a key point?

**In the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Mt 20:1-16) the twist comes when the workers who labored twelve hours get the same wage as the workers who labored only one hour.**

**In the parable of the Talents (Mt 25:14-29) the twist comes when the unproductive servant is judged severely, even though he had not stolen, embezzled, or squandered his master's money, but only returned it without loss.**

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Read the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and answer the following questions.
  - To whom was the parable addressed?
  - How would you describe the addressee's character and attitude?
  - What effect did the parable have upon him?
  - What is the topic of discussion that the parable addresses?

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- Why did Jesus use the three characters – priest, Levite, and Samaritan?
- What is the main point of the parable?
- What does it mean for you?

### **HOMEWORK**

1. Study for the test by reviewing the course's lesson notes.