

Rule 11: Parables & Proverbs

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Hermeneutics: How to Read and Understand the Bible

RULE #11: Use Parables and Proverbs Cautiously.

- I. Scripture admits that parables and proverbs are difficult to understand and confuse hearers.
 - A. These are dark sayings needing skill to understand (Pr 1:5-6; John 16:25,29; Ezek 17:2).
 - B. The Lord and His disciples knew parables confused their hearers (Matthew 13:10-13).
 - C. Men who preach much from parables can preach anything they wish with impunity.
- II. Consider the intent of proverbs and parables. Do not read more into them than what God intended.
 - A. “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Pr 29:18), may make a great slogan for a fund raising campaign for a new building; but the text has nothing to do with such carnal thinking.
 - B. The Good Samaritan was given to define a man’s neighbor (Luke 10:29-37). Finding some spiritual application for each detail usually indicates hallucination rather than inspiration. The wounded Jew does not represent men dead in trespasses and sins; the Samaritan does not represent a gospel preacher; the wine does not represent the gospel; the oil does not represent the Spirit; the two pence do not represent the two testaments; the inn does not represent the church; and so forth.
 - C. The prodigal son was given to rebuke the Pharisees and comfort sinners with the priority that Jesus Christ put upon sinners in His ministry (Luke 15:1-2). The rebuke is observed by considering the “neglect” of the ninety-nine sheep, the nine coins, and the faithful brother of the prodigal. The comfort is observed by considering the joyful celebration of recovering the one sheep, the one coin, and the prodigal son.
 - D. The sower was given to us to exhort us to give careful attention to how we respond to the word of God (Luke 8:18). It was not given for us to speculate whether each type of ground was regenerate or unregenerate. This parable was not given for theological speculation or instruction but rather practical warning.
 - E. The unjust steward is an obscure parable teaching the importance of setting our affection and attention on heavenly things, for we will need that security in the day of our death (Luke 16:1-15). This is not a lesson in wise financial management and how to have other jobs available when you are fired from your present job for malfeasance.
 - F. Do not let the details of a parable corrupt your understanding. Emphasize the intent and overall context of the parable. While leaven is the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees in one place (Matt 16:6) and malice and wickedness in another place (I Cor 5:7-8), it is the kingdom of God itself in Matthew 13:33. The lesson here is not how sin can infect and corrupt the kingdom of God, but rather how the kingdom of God can affect the world around it (Matt 13:31-32).
- III. Proceed carefully with difficult words and obscure figures of speech when studying individual proverbs.

- A. Consider Proverbs 1:17. Is it vain for the fowler to spread his net in the sight of a bird, because that bird will not come near the obvious trap? Or is it vain for the bird to watch a fowler set a snare in his sight, since his birdbrain will take him straight to the bait? The context indicates that foolish young men will hasten to their destruction, regardless of the clear evidence of judgment before them.
- B. Consider Proverbs 5:16. Though water has just been used in the previous proverb to refer to lawful sexual pleasure with one's wife, the wise man here uses it to describe the lawful children resulting from that pleasure with his wife. Many lawful children and their influence on behalf of the family is a further reason to avoid the strange woman and delight in the wife of your youth, who is the means of this family blessing.
- C. Considers Proverbs 8:30. Solomon is not teaching the eternal sonship of Jesus Christ, as many presume and teach. He is in the midst of an extensive personification of wisdom, which was and is an integral part of God's very nature. The personification is not a real person, but a powerful literary tool and figure of speech to exalt an abstract thing.
- D. Consider Proverbs 9:17. Stolen waters are not truly sweet; and bread eaten in secret is not truly pleasant. These are the lying words of the whore, which we determine from the context. One of the lies of a whore is the excitement created by the sin of the liaison.
- E. Consider Proverbs 11:24. What kind of scattering leads to increase, and what kind of saving leads to poverty? Solomon in this place is promoting generosity in financial obligations such as tithes, charity, and business transactions; and he is condemning stinginess in these same situations. God will make up the difference for a generous man.
- F. Consider Proverbs 15:15. The afflicted man here is more troubled by his negative attitude than he is any set of circumstances, for the man enjoying a continual feast is doing so by the power of a merry heart! Happiness and joy are choices of the human spirit, by the grace of God. But the evil life of a depressed man is also a choice, for he chooses a negative outlook on everything. Circumstances do not make a person happy, but contentment and joy will do so.
- G. Consider Proverbs 17:23. Magistrates and men in positions of authority will face attempts to buy their favors, but only wicked rulers will take such gifts. The proverb condemns the taker of the gift, rather than the payer, as the rest of Scripture emphasizes. It is natural to try to buy one's liberty or judgment in a court case, but only wicked magistrates would ever consider bribery.
- H. Consider Proverbs 20:1. When Solomon speaks of wine being a mocker and strong drink being raging, he is using metonymy of cause for effect. Wine can be the source of mocking, and strong drink can be the source of raging; however, neither wine nor strong drink have mocked or raged. It is their deceitful influence upon men to abuse them that leads to such poor results.
- I. Consider Proverbs 20:25. Here is one of the most obscure proverbs. There are two main possible interpretations. Is the sin here consuming something you gave to the Lord and later vows to check into it? Or are there two sins here, consuming things given to the Lord and looking for escape after making presumptuous vows? We choose the latter with an ellipsis.
- J. Consider Proverbs 20:30. Solomon speaks of wounds (27:6) and stripes (19:29) being the affect of proper discipline. Solomon also speaks of the belly by a figure being our internal decision-making apparatus (20:27). Experience teaches us that wounds have a blue color (and black) and that the rod

leaves stripes. Therefore, we conclude that Solomon's proverb teaches that the wounds and stripes of reproof and corporal punishment cleanse us from faults of the heart. And this agrees with other proverbs (Prov 22:15; 23:14; 29:15).

- K. Consider Proverbs 22:28. You will need a little knowledge of historical real estate markings to fully appreciate this proverb. The warning is against business innovations or shady dealings that are not perfectly honest and true. Good and wise men will never defraud another person in a business transaction, especially by subtle means. They will provide things openly honest.
- L. Consider Proverbs 25:11. One has wildly imagined that this proverb describes the ancient gold-silver ratio and proves that word definitions are more important than the context of words. But the wise man never dreamed of such a thing, for he is praising the beauty of appropriate speech.
- M. Proverbs 29:24. The cursing in this proverb is the oath of the magistrate to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me, God. This lying accomplice will not betray the thief, even when under oath. He must hate his own soul, for judgment is surely coming.

[← Rule #10](#)

[Rule #12 →](#)