



Principles for Interpreting Scripture

**Interpreting Gospels and
New Testament Letters**

April 16

Please sit in the center section!

Genre

Genre refers to the different forms, kinds, or categories of literature

Different genres require slightly different “rules” for interpretation

Biblical genres: narrative history, law, poetry, prophecy, wisdom, gospel, letter, apocalyptic

Genre: New Testament Gospels

The Gospels are stories of Jesus drawn from the personal experience of the apostles

Gospel writers communicate important information *not only* through the stories, themselves, *but also* in the way they put the stories together

The Gospels are “Christological biographies”: they communicate *history* in a way that also communicates *theology*

Principles for Interpreting New Testament Gospels

1) Keep in mind special literary forms used in Gospels

- Hyperbole, simile and metaphor, irony, rhetorical questions, parables

2) Find the meaning in the individual story

- Ask: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?
- Look for interpretive instruction at beginning and/or end of each story

3) Look for meaning communicated by way stories are connected to each other

Principles for Interpreting Parables

Parables are stories with two levels of meaning, where certain details in the story represent something else

1) Look for one main point for each main character or group of characters

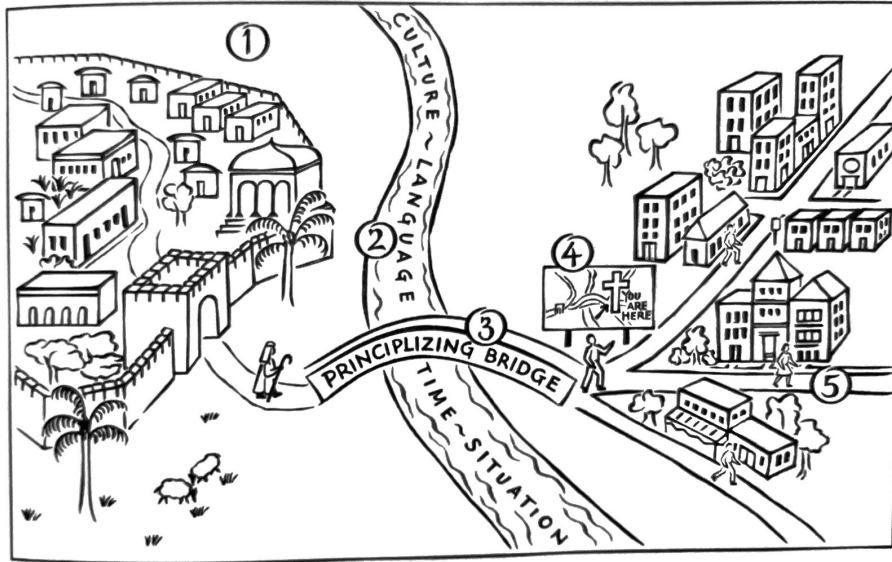
2) Main points you surmise from parable must be ones that Jesus' original audience would have understood

²⁹ But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”
³⁰ Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” ³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”
(Luke 10:29-37)

The Interpretive Journey

Step 1: Grasping the text in “their town”

What did the text mean to the biblical audience?



- What is the genre of the passage?
- What are some guiding principles for this genre?
- Where does this passage fit within the large, overarching story of the Bible?

-Read and observe the text carefully

-Synthesize the original meaning of the passage in one or two sentences

Clues to Meaning

Comparison and Contrast

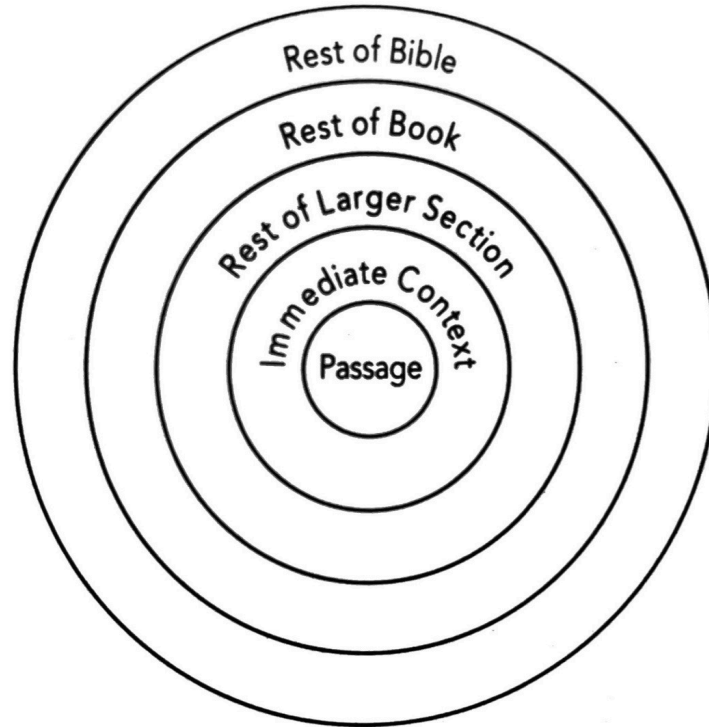
Repetition of Words

Commands

Literary Context

Literary context relates to the particular form a passage takes (genre) and to the words, sentences, and paragraphs that surround a given passage (surrounding context)

Literary Context



We always give the immediate context the greatest weight in shaping interpretation of our passage

²⁵ And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” ²⁷ And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” ²⁸ And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

(Luke 10:25-28)

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. ³⁹ And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, ⁴² but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."

(Luke 10:38-42)

Literary Context

Darrell Bock, on how this parable fits in to rest of larger section and the book:

“Discipleship is one of Luke’s most important themes. Luke 10:25–11:13 focuses on this issue by highlighting relationships at three fundamental levels: with one’s neighbor (10:25–37), with Jesus (10:38–42), and before God through prayer (11:1–13). The close juxtaposition of these relationships suggests the vertical-horizontal aspects of spirituality...Ethics is not a matter of abstract reflection on certain situations; it is a reflection of character that combines listening to God with sensitive service to people.”

Historical-Cultural Context

1) The Biblical Writer

- What was the writer's background?
- When did he write?
- What kind of ministry did he have?
- What was his purpose in writing?

2) The Biblical Audience

- What was their social/political/religious background?
- What circumstances were they facing at the time of the writing?

3) Other Historical-Cultural Elements

- Historical, social, geographical, religious, political, and economic elements that shape your passage

Historical-Cultural Context

On the relationship between Jews and Samaritans:

“To Jews, this ethnic group was traitors, a collection of half-breeds. The name came from the capital of the separatist northern kingdom of Israel, Samaria, in a rule founded by Omri (1 Kings 16:21–24). The Samaritans intermarried with the pagan nations and were thus seen as unfaithful to the nation of Israel.”

Historical-Cultural Context

On the lawyer's question:

“An ancient Jewish book of wisdom, Sirach 12:1–4, tells its readers to not help a sinner. Thus, the lawyer’s question is really an attempt to create a distinction, arguing that some people are neighbors and others are not, and that one’s responsibility is only to love God’s people. The suggestion that some people are “non-neighbors” is what Jesus responds to in his story. Jesus picks a Samaritan as the highlight of the story because such a person is a “non-neighbor” in the lawyer’s eyes...The expectations in the account are that the priest and Levite are the good guys, who could be expected to help the wounded traveler; but a Samaritan as a half-breed and renegade would be the last person from whom one could expect compassion.”

Historical-Cultural Context

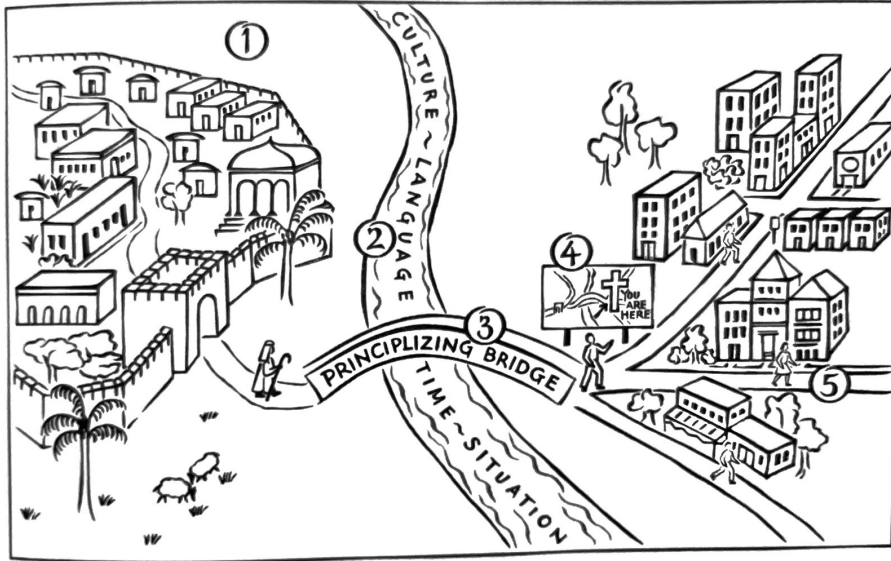
On the road from Jerusalem to Jericho:

“Jesus picks the treacherous road from Jericho to Jerusalem as the site of the incident. This seventeen-mile journey was well known for its danger. The cultural equivalent today might be a trip through parts of the inner city in the middle of the night. This road was hazardous, as the man who falls among robbers finds out. Thieves took advantage of the caves that lined the road as it wound through the desert, jumping travelers as they passed through. So this man is stripped of his clothing, beaten, and robbed.”

The Interpretive Journey

Step 1: Grasping the text in “their town”

What did the text mean to the biblical audience?



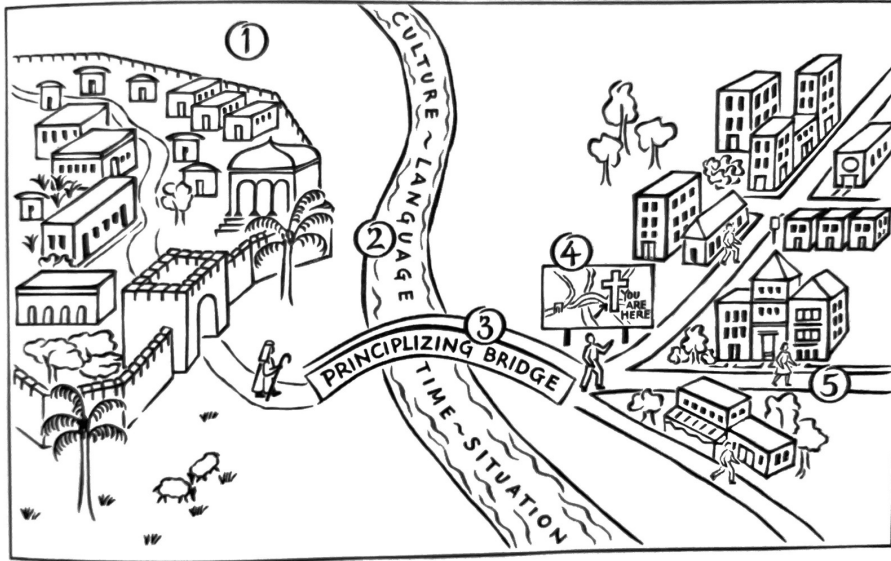
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Jesus claimed that God's ancient command to "love one's neighbor as one's self" was less about good Jews loving the other good Jews who lived next door and more about having a heart of mercy and compassion toward all people, regardless of their social demographic or religious background.

The Interpretive Journey

Step 2: Measuring the width of the “river of differences”

What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?

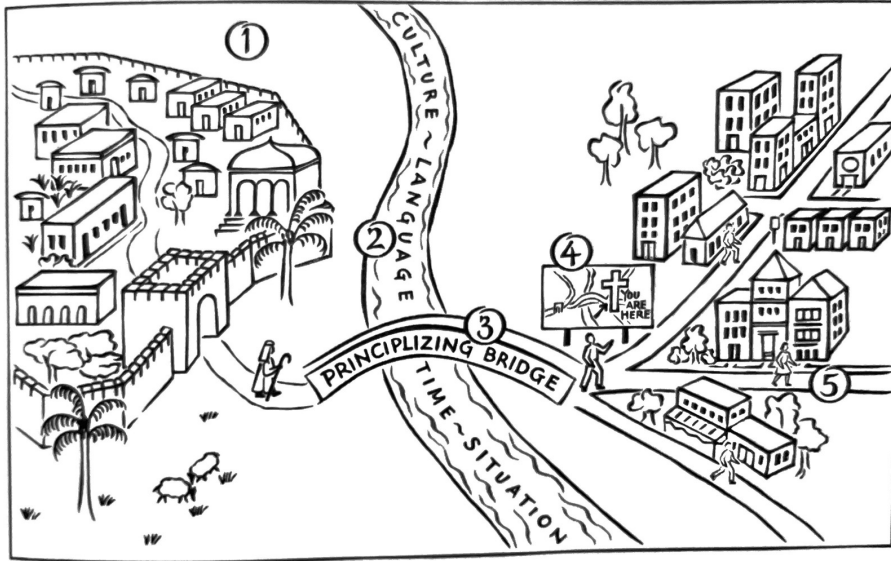


- Culture, language, situation, time, covenant?
- What are the similarities between the biblical audience and us?

The Interpretive Journey

Step 3: Crossing the “principlizing bridge”

What is the theological principle in this text?



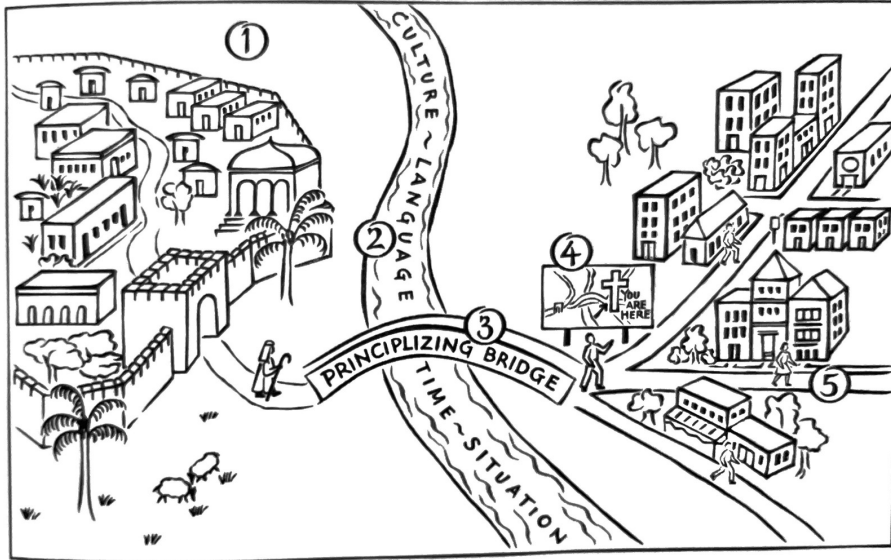
- What is the theological principle in this text?
 - It should be reflected in the text
 - It should be timeless and not tied to a specific situation
 - It should not be culturally bound
 - It should correspond to the teaching of the rest of Scripture
 - It should be relevant to both the biblical and the contemporary audience
- This principle becomes the “principlizing bridge” for crossing river of differences

Jesus commanded that we show mercy and compassion to all people, even those who might be considered religious, political, or cultural “enemies”, and even when it is costly.

The Interpretive Journey

Step 4: Consulting the “biblical map”

How does our theological principle fit with the rest of the Bible?



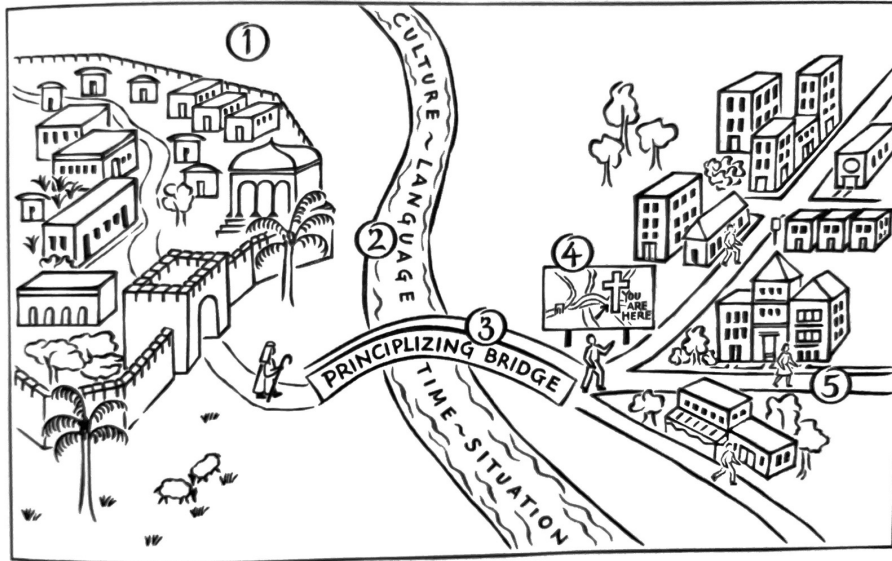
- Reflect back and forth between this teaching and rest of Scripture (Analogy of Scripture)
- Is this teaching consistent with rest of Scripture?
- Do other portions of Scripture add insight or qualification to this principle?
- Reword your theological principle, if necessary, to ensure it fits with rest of Scripture

Jesus commanded that we show mercy and compassion to all people, even those who might be considered religious or cultural “enemies”, and even when it is costly. This does not preclude us from using wise, biblical judgment in choosing how to respond to sinful, violent, or destructive people.

The Interpretive Journey

Step 5: Grasping the text in our town

How should individual Christians today live out this theological principle?



-How does it apply to real-life situations today?

-While there will usually be only a few (and often only one) theological principle in a single passage that is relevant for all Christians today, there will be numerous applications of that principle in the lives of people

Where did Augustine go wrong?

New Testament Letters

21 of 27 New Testament books are letters

General three-part structure:

- *Introduction*
- *Body*
- *Conclusion*

Letters were *authoritative substitutes for personal presence*

Letters were *situational*

- *No single NT letter was written as an exhaustive theological treatise; each letter was written to apply specific theological truths to specific situations*