



By
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STUDENTS OF ENGLISH grammar, literature, and creative writing quickly learn the difference between similes and metaphors. Both are figures of speech designed to strengthen the writer's communication. Both compare a lesser known truth with something that is much more familiar. The simile uses the words *like* or *as* to remind the reader that though the two realities are similar, they are also different. For example, a person may say that someone else is *like a rock*. A metaphor can make the same comparison without *like* or *as*, and it makes the writer's comparison even stronger. In this case, the writer would say that the person *is a rock*. No reader would think that the person was an inanimate object. Rather, the reader would transfer the properties of the rock that apply, such as its strength. The metaphor makes a stronger comparison than the simile. Certainly one might misunderstand the distinction between the reality and the metaphor, but that is a risk the writer takes in delivering descriptive writing.¹

Paul had many sources from which to draw his metaphors. He had both a Jewish and Gentile background. As an educated Jew and a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5), Paul had a wealth of images he could use as metaphors. He called the Christian's body a "temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 6:19, ESV). Using that metaphor, he contrasted the difference between the old covenant and the

Left: Terra-cotta figurine of a pedagogue and student, dated 3rd–2nd centuries B.C.; about 6 in. tall. In Hellenistic culture, a pedagogue was an adult male who was responsible for the moral and

social education of a young boy. This was the term Paul used to describe the Law, "But since that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian (*paidagogos*; Gal. 3:25; HCSB).

Paul was a master at using metaphors to create powerful images and understanding in the minds of his readers.



Above: Floor mosaic that was part of the Palace of the Grand Masters

at Rhodes; image shows a gladiator fighting a big cat, likely a leopard.



Above: Bronze gladiatorial helmet, Roman 1st–2nd centuries A.D.

new. The Holy Spirit now resided in the believer. Those in Corinth who were abusing their bodies through sexual immorality were abusing the dwelling place of God (vv. 18–19). This metaphor would have spoken powerfully to Paul's Jewish audience.

Paul also drew from the Gentile heritage he received from his father (Acts 22:28). He described his conflict with opponents in Ephesus: "I fought wild beasts" (1 Cor. 15:32, NIV). This was an image

from the gladiatorial contests of the Roman Empire.²

In 2 Timothy 2:1–7, Paul referred to Christians as soldiers, athletes, and farmers. Soldiers did not get involved in civilian affairs, athletes competed according to the rules, and farmers gained a share of their crops. As a prisoner on several occasions, Paul had spent time with soldiers. This led to even more metaphors, such as the Word of God being "the sword of the Spirit" (Eph. 6:17). By drawing upon his environment, Paul tailored his metaphors so his readers could understand the deeper truths of the gospel.

Some of Paul's metaphors came from city life. For instance, having viewed the construction of buildings in the city, Paul stated that Jesus Christ was the "cornerstone" (2:20). By using this metaphor, Paul was showing the principal importance of Christ in His own church.

Paul also referred to some people as honorable bowls and some as dishonorable bowls (2 Tim. 2:20). A household may have had bowls of silver and gold, but they also had some made of wood and clay. Like fine china in a modern house, these silver and gold bowls were reserved for special usage. With this metaphor Paul encouraged Christians to purify themselves so they would be useful to the Lord (v. 21).

Although many of Paul's metaphors came from city life, he also drew upon rural life for imagery.³ He encouraged Christians not to be "unequally yoked" with an unbeliever (2 Cor. 6:14, ESV). By comparing a Christian's relationship to a "yoke," Paul made a powerful statement about entering a working relationship with an unbeliever. One of the three metaphors Paul used in 2 Timothy 1:1-7 was of the farmer. The farmer's patience and diligence ensured that he would eat, and Paul compared Christians who

were sowing seeds of the Spirit with the hardworking farmer. Whether in the city or country, Paul constantly examined familiar ways to speak of possibly new or unfamiliar spiritual truths.

Another resource for Paul's metaphors was the Roman government. He called Christian witnesses "ambassadors for Christ" (2 Cor. 5:20). Paul believed that like ambassadors, who lived in a foreign land while representing their homeland, Christians represented the kingdom of God in a world that needed to know Him. Additionally, Paul called Jesus the "mediator" (1 Tim. 2:5). A mediator was a person between two parties who tried to resolve differences and bring the two parties together. The metaphor powerfully demonstrated Jesus' resolve to make people right with God. In Philippians 3:20, Paul described salvation as citizenship in heaven. As a

Roman colony, Philippi had a strong view of citizenship, thus strengthening this metaphor.⁴ Again, Paul was demonstrating his ability to use metaphors that would best speak to a certain group of readers.

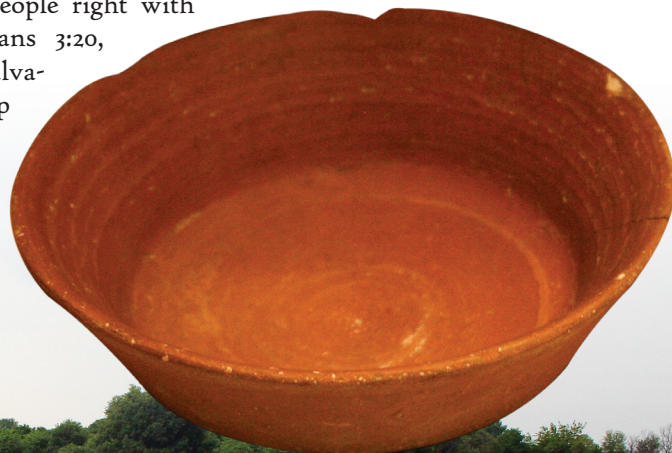
Paul also drew metaphors from the world of commerce. He called the Holy Spirit the "down payment" of salvation (2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:14, HCSB). Paul called himself a "debtor" to those who needed the gospel (Rom. 1:14, KJV). He refused to identify himself with the metaphor of "peddler" that many in Corinth had labeled him (2 Cor. 2:17, ESV). The Corinthians would have made the connection; the term referred to those who peddled goods such as wine and yet diluted it before they sold it.⁵ In contrast, Paul spoke with

Below: Panoramic view of the Roman forum at Philippi. In the background is a large Christian church dated to

about A.D. 550.

Right: Dated to the 8th cent. B.C., this bowl, made on a potter's

wheel and covered in red slip, shows good craftsmanship; the clay was smoothed before being fired.





ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE/ WALTERS ART MUSEUM/ BALTIMORE (75/9947)

Left: From the Isthmia region of Greece (east of Corinth), marble

statue fragment depicting a gladiator holding a vanquished lion.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ JAMES McLEMORE/ ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM IN ISTHIA (10/38/2)

sincerity or purity in his message about Christ.

The apostle turned to the world of education and training of children to deliver one of his most powerful metaphors about the Law. He stated that the Law was a “guardian” that had custody of a person

before he put his faith in Jesus (Gal. 3:25-26, ESV).⁶ A guardian was a slave who took a young pupil for instruction and protected him until he was old enough to protect himself.⁷ When the gospel came along, the guardian’s job was done. The Law had pointed people to Christ. That was not to say that the Law was invalid, but it had fulfilled its greatest purpose.

As seen by Paul’s various sources for his metaphors, the apostle, when conveying spiritual truths, showed himself adept at choosing everyday images that people already knew. Indeed, Paul was a master at using metaphors to create powerful images in the minds of his readers—metaphors that strengthened others’ understanding about him, his message, their salvation, and the church.

Why were Paul’s metaphors such a powerful component of his writing?



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/25/20)

Above: In the 1st cent., Roman soldiers carried both a sword (a *gladius*) and dagger (*pugio*), which they strapped on using two crossed belts.

Left: First-century relief designed for a Roman villa; the scene depicts a herdsman and his yoked oxen; Thasian dolomitic marble.

They spoke truth to readers of his day—and that truth has proven timeless.

Believers today still affirm that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. We are ambassadors for Christ. The Holy Spirit is the down payment of our salvation. Christians should not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. Even centuries later, Paul’s metaphors remain meaningful. They give continuing evidence of the apostle’s outstanding eye for everyday items that would speak eternal and powerful truths. ❖

1. David J. Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors: Their Context and Character* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 1.

2. *Ibid.*, 264.

3. *Ibid.*, 32.

4. HCSB Study Bible (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2010), 2040.

5. Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors*, 171.

6. Other translations of *guardian* include *tutor* (NASB, NKJV) and *schoolmaster* (KJV).

7. HCSB Study Bible, 2018.

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