

Old Sayings - Is That Really In The Bible?

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Certain phrases in the Bible are often misquoted or attributed to other sources. There are even more phrases that aren't in the Bible, but for some reason lots of people think they are.

Some of these phrases are in the Bible in principle, but are in fact worded quite differently than the way they are usually attributed. Some aren't in the Bible at all, and more than a few are, but are pretty obscure. Watch out -- there are some tricky ones here.

The questions are linked to their answers online or scroll to the bottom.

1. Feet of clay
 2. God helps those who help themselves
 3. To the victor goes the spoils
 4. Can a leopard change his spots?
 5. Heart of gold
 6. Salt of the earth
 7. The blind leading the blind
 8. Adam and Eve eating the apple
 9. Money is the root of all evil
 10. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you
 11. Pride goeth before a fall
 12. Apple of one's eye
 13. A house divided against itself cannot stand
 14. Get thee behind me, Satan
 15. The patience of Job
 16. Lucifer, Satan's name
 17. God is love
 18. Pouring oil on troubled waters
 19. Straight and narrow
 20. Fire and brimstone
 21. Speaking with a forked tongue
 22. Robbing Peter to pay Paul
 23. Trinity
 24. The Earth is flat
 25. Rome wasn't built in a day
 26. No man is an island
 27. Milk and honey
 28. All that glitters is not gold
 29. Amazing grace
 30. How the mighty have fallen
 31. God works in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform
 32. The handwriting on the wall
 33. Fly in the ointment
 34. God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb
 35. The lamb will lie down with the lion
 36. Cleanliness is next to godliness
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1. Feet of clay:

This is based on a statement in the Bible, but the Bible doesn't actually say it: In Daniel 2, the prophet Daniel explains the meaning of a dream King Nebuchadnezzar had. The king dreamed about a giant statue with head and shoulders of gold, a chest of silver, legs and thighs of iron, and feet made partially of clay and partially of iron. The golden head was the Babylonian Empire, the silver chest was the Alexandrian Greek Empire, the iron legs referred to the Roman Empire, and the feet of clay and iron describe a kingdom that hasn't come yet: "And as the toes of the feet were partly of iron and partly of clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly fragile," says Daniel to the king (2:42).

Today the expression "feet of clay" is used in reference to someone who is untrustworthy; someone who might disappear when the going gets tough. This is pretty close to the original definition, but the popular vernacular has changed with use over the centuries.

2. God helps those who help themselves:

This isn't in the Bible, but it is surprising how many folks still think it is. It probably originated with Sidney Algernon (1622-1683), in "Discourses on Government," Chap. ii, Sect. xxiii.

3. To the victor goes the spoils:

This is not in the Bible; it was written by William Learned Marcy in his *Life Of Jackson*. Originally it was worded "To the victor belongs the spoils of the enemy."

4. Can a leopard change his spots?

Surprise! Many people think Kipling said this first in *Jungle Book*, but its first appearance is in the Bible, in Jeremiah 13:23: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Then may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil." (Food for thought...)

5. Heart of gold:

This phrase is not in the Bible, although the concept is; gold refining is sometimes used as an metaphor for heart purity -- Proverbs 17:3, for instance, comes close: "The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests the hearts."

6. Salt of the earth:

This is in the Bible; it is one of the many phrases from the Sermon on the Mount that remain firmly fixed in modern nomenclature: "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men" (Matthew 5:13).

7. The blind leading the blind:

Another phrase coined by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: "Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into the ditch?" (Luke 6:39).

8. Adam and Eve eating the apple:

All it says is that they ate from the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (Genesis 3). It almost certainly wasn't an apple; many scholars think it was a type of fig (I don't know why). Regardless, it doesn't say apple, but for some reason the image of Adam and Eve eating apples is as enduring as George Washington and the cherry tree.

9. Money is the root of all evil:

This is like "feet of clay"; it's there but it is often misquoted -- and in this case the misquotation is pretty serious. What it actually says is this: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows" (1 Timothy 6:10). There is a subtle but enormous difference between money and the love of money.

10. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you:

This is the familiar "Golden Rule" (a phrase, BTW, that isn't in the Bible either). It is in the Bible in principle but not in these words. What Jesus really said, in Matthew 7:12, was this: "Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

11. Pride goeth before a fall:

Another misquoted verse; Proverbs 16:18 says it like this: "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."

12. Apple of one's eye:

It is not well-known, but this phrase appears in the Bible no less than six separate times. An example is Zechariah 2:8-9: "For this is what the LORD Almighty says: "After he has honored me and has sent me against the nations that have plundered you -- for whoever touches you touches the apple of his eye -- I will surely raise my hand against them so that their slaves will plunder them."

The word "apple" in this context means "pupil"; it is used to connote God's great love for His children - they are as close to Him as His eyes (it also shows that it is not smart to pick on Israel. I don't know about you, but I don't think poking God in the eye would be a good idea!). The modern definition - someone who is dear and precious to one's heart - is right in line with the original.

13. A house divided against itself cannot stand:

Lincoln did use this phrase in a speech about the Civil War, but Jesus said it first in Mark 3:25: "If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand." He said this after He cast out a demon and was accused of using demonic power to do it; the point being that it would be rather silly for Satan to cast out Satan.

14. Get thee behind me, Satan:

I meet a lot of people who think this is some sort of catechismal phrase or something, but Jesus said it (to Peter; not a polite thing to say at all, eh?) in Matthew 16:23 and Mark 8:33; in Luke 4:8 He said it directly to Satan.

15. The patience of Job:

This is in the Bible, in James 5:11: "You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy." (Most versions have "perseverance," "patience" or some other synonym). The funny thing is, "patience" here doesn't mean patience the way we understand it today; the original Greek word has a meaning closer to endurance, or even stubbornness. The context reflects this, and if you read the book of Job you'll find that Job was more stubborn than patient; he hung in there and didn't give up, but he certainly was no stoic, silent sufferer!

16. Lucifer, Satan's name:

Sometimes you pick up a book like *The Dictionary Of Misinformation* or *They Never Said It* and the author or authors will pounce on this one. They'll quote this passage from Isaiah 14:12: "How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, you who weakened the nations!" Then they smugly note that this passage actually addresses the King of Babylon, and conclude that theologians have been wrong all these years to call Satan Lucifer.

But it's not quite that simple. The passage does begin with Babylon, but it ends up with Satan; the phrase "you are brought down to Sheol" appears twice, denoting two subjects to the paragraph, which are compared to one another (both Satan and the King of Babylon were extremely proud -- the point of the passage).

"Satan" is actually a title, meaning "The Accuser," and he has many other names and titles; Beelzebub, devil, father of lies, Lucifer, and so on. The idea of a demonic spirit standing behind an evil king is a familiar one; note for instance in Daniel 10 that when the angel Gabriel takes three weeks to show up in order to answer a prayer, he explains his tardiness by saying, "But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days; and behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I had been left alone there with the kings of Persia" (10:13). The human prince or king of Persia could hardly stop Gabriel, so it had to be a powerful demonic force here. This concept of demons moving around behind the scenes and affecting governments is called principalities (see also Romans 8:38, Ephesians 3:10 and 6:12, and Colossians 1:16 and 2:15).

17. God is love:

I don't know why, but I've often run into folks who think this phrase is a religious invention. It's in the Bible twice, though, in 1 John 4:8: "He who does not love does not know God, for God is love," and 1 John 4:16: "And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him."

18. Pouring oil on troubled waters:

Nope. It's every bit as old as the Bible, though; both Pliny and Plutarch referred to it in the first century A.D.

19. Straight and narrow:

Not really. Jesus said something close to this in Matthew 7:13-14: "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it." Same idea, different words.

20. Fire and brimstone:

Six references to this altogether. "Brimstone" is a slightly archaic English word meaning "sulfur," and it is so rendered in some versions of the Bible.

21. Speaking with a forked tongue:

This isn't in the Bible and I couldn't find a reference to it anywhere. Anyone care to enlighten me?

22. Robbing Peter to pay Paul:

Not in the Bible. Earliest reference is from Wycliffe's *Select English Works* in 1380. Perhaps this is why folks sometimes think it's in the Bible; he published the first English Bible just a few years later. Peter's and Paul's prominence in the Bible could have something to do with it too.

There's also a 12th century Latin phrase; *tanquam si quis crucifigeret Paulum ut redemeret Petrum* (as it were that one would crucify Paul in order to redeem Peter). There are other similar references in

French and other languages, referring to clothes as well as money and crucifixion, but the oldest that uses the verb "rob" is from Wycliffe.

23. Trinity:

Much smarter folks than me have written millions of pages of material on the Trinity; I couldn't even begin to encapsulate the idea. Suffice to say this: the concept is totally soaked into the Bible from one end to the other, but the word "Trinity" is not actually in the Bible; it was coined as a name for the concept.

24. The Earth is flat:

I wish I had a dollar for every time I hear someone confidently state that the Bible says the earth is flat. Not true, any more than the idea that all ancient people thought the earth was flat. At one time long ago, some scientists did think the earth was flat and supported by three huge pillars. The pillars were on the backs of three elephants and the elephants were on the backs of tortoises. This didn't last long though, as you may well imagine. The Babylonians, who were sophisticated astronomers, thought, based on their observations of star and planet movements, that the earth was shaped like a cylinder. Not a bad guess, actually.

As for the Bible: it teaches that the earth is spherical, that it travels around the sun (contrary to the commonly-held belief that it teaches the sun revolves around the earth), and that it is suspended in space: read Job 26:7 and Isaiah 40:28.

25. Rome wasn't built in a day:

Not in the Bible and I've never been able to find out who said it first. Somebody else know?

26. No man is an island:

Not in the Bible; John Donne wrote it in the 15th century, in his Meditation XVII: "No man is an Island, entire of it self; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee."

27. Milk and honey:

This phrase is as Biblical as they come, with no less than 20 appearances. It refers to Cana (modern-day Israel), or the Promised Land.

28. All that glitters is not gold:

Not in the Bible, it was originally penned by Thomas Gray in 1742, in his Ode On A Distant Prospect of Eton College: "Not all that tempts your wand'ring eyes/And heedless hearts, is lawful prize;/Nor all, that glisters, gold." The word "glisters" isn't used anymore so the expression has changed somewhat over the years.

29. Amazing grace:

Nope, although the last two lines of the first stanza of the famous hymn -- "I once was lost but now am found/was blind but now I see" -- are taken directly from the Gospels (John 9:25; Luke 15:24-32).

By the way, John Newton, who wrote Amazing Grace (and over 400 other hymns) was, before his conversion, a vicious and cruel slave trader. When he wrote "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound/that saved a wretch like me" he wasn't just being poetic; he had been a pretty rotten guy and he knew it.

30. How the mighty have fallen:

David said this after his best friend, Jonathan, was killed in a battle defending his really awful father, King Saul: "Your glory, O Israel, lies slain on your heights. How the mighty have fallen! ... How the mighty have fallen in battle! Jonathan lies slain on your heights" (2 Samuel 1:19, 25). We use the phrase today to denote a petty ruler whose kingdom has crumbled under its own weight, but originally it referred to the fact that when the bad guys go down in flames they sometimes take the good guys with them.

31. God works in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform:

Not in the Bible. William Cowper penned this one:

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.
(From "On The Loss of the Royal George")

32. The handwriting on the wall:

This is in the Bible, in Daniel 5:6. Belshazzar thought it might be neat to party with the sacred utensils from God's temple. God's hand showed up and wrote "You have been weighed in the balance and found wanting" on the wall ("Mene mene tekel upharsin"). No wonder his knees knocked together!

33. Fly in the ointment:

This is from the Bible, believe it or not: "Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour: so doth a little folly him that is in reputation for wisdom and honour" (Eccl. 10:1, KJV). It is used today to mean basically the same thing: that a lot of good can be spoiled by only a little bad.

34. God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb:

This is not in the Bible. Its most well-known attribution is from *A Sentimental Journey*, by Laurence Sterne. But it's not original with him; Henri Estienne (1531-1598) said it first, although the French ("Dieu mesure le froid à la brebis tondue") has a slightly different meaning than the English.

35. The lamb will lie down with the lion:

Sorry, trick question! I hate to spoil it for all of you who like those cute lamb-and-lion Christmas cards (I do too, actually) but that's not what the Bible says. Here's the actual reference:

"The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest" (Isaiah 11:6-8).

So the lamb will actually lie down with a wolf. I think this has changed in popular nomenclature over the years because of the alliteration in English.

36. Cleanliness is next to godliness

This was John Wesley, of all folks, in his sermon "On Dress" (Sermons, Sermon xciii). What he said was, "Certainly this is a duty, not a sin. 'Cleanliness is indeed next to godliness.'"