

Lesson Eleven: Rules on Interpretation - III

The Language of the Bible

13. Rightly divide the language.

Literal Language

A good portion of the Bible is plain, literal language. It was used by the Lord to state facts, name persons and places, relate incidents, issue commandments and warnings, and draw conclusions

Such things should be taken literally and one should not be constantly searching for hidden meanings and fancy figures of speech.

The literal meaning of a word is that meaning which is given it by those to whom it is addressed.

Figurative Language

Figurative language involves the use of symbols, stories, or other descriptive means to express truth.

The Purpose of Figurative Language

1. To illustrate and graphically portray truth taught elsewhere in Scripture.
2. To teach things outside our experience. To explain the unseen by the seen.
3. To make truth stand out more vividly.
4. To make a more lasting impression.
5. To conceal truth from its enemies.

When Language is Figurative

1. When a literal interpretation involves an impossibility or an absurdity. (Luke 9:60)
2. When a literal interpretation involves a contradiction or inconsistency. (John 11:25-26)
3. When a literal interpretation involves an immoral conclusion. (Matthew 18:8-9)
4. When such is implied by the context.
5. When such is stated. (John 2:18-21)
6. When common sense determines it to be. (John 4:10-15)

Rules for Understanding Figurative Language

1. Determine what kind of figure it is.
2. Follow the author's explanation, if he gives one. (Luke 8:11; 12:16-21)
3. Harmonize the figurative with the literal.
4. Harmonize the figurative with the customs of the time.
5. Do not press the meaning too far.
6. Remember that figures of speech may change their meaning from one instance to another and do not always represent the same things. (Matthew 13:33; 16:6-12)

Some Figures of Speech

1. **Parable.** A simple, normal, real life story or illustration used to present some moral truth. The Scriptures record at least thirty parables that Jesus used in His ministry. They had a way of concealing truth from those who would not receive or follow it.
2. **Fable.** A fictitious or imaginary story whose purpose was to teach some moral lesson. (2 Kings 14:8-10)
3. **Simile.** A thing or action that is said to be “like” or “as” something of a different kind or quality. (Matthew 3:16; Isaiah 1:18; 53:6)
4. **Metaphor.** A word or phrase which is said to be something else because of a likeness involved. It is calling one thing by another word, more descriptive and figurative. (Luke 13:32; Matthew 26:26)
5. **Allegory.** A metaphor extended into a complete story to illustrate some truth. The writer does not identify all the particular parts but leaves the reader to infer their meaning. (Ephesians 6:11-17)
6. **Riddle.** An analogy written up as a puzzle. To unravel it will thus produce some truth. (Judges 14:14)
7. **Hyperbole.** An exaggeration of some statement for the purpose of emphasis. (Psalm 22:6,14)
8. **Irony and sarcasm.** A sharp remark uttered in contempt or ridicule. The latter, sarcasm, is more severe in degree and intensity. (Matthew 27:29; Mark 15:31,32)
9. **Interrogation.** To question for effect, often not seeking an answer. It will bring out a point very strongly or even argue to the contrary. (Hebrews 2:3)
10. **Metonymy.** To substitute one word for another because they are related. (1 Corinthians 11:25,26; Acts 15:21)
11. **Personification.** Inanimate beings have personal attributes. (Psalm 114:3)
12. **Anthropomorphism.** The ascribing of human forms or attributes to God. (Exodus 33:22,23)

Four Types of Language That Make Great Use of the Figurative

1. **Poetry.** The use of artistic and imaginative ideas expressed in a language of rhythm.
2. **Proverb.** A profound but short pithy statement of truth, commonly held and valuable to those who will heed.
3. **Prophecy.** An instruction from God to man in regard to some significant fact of the past, the present, or the future. It makes man more aware of God’s providential work in the world, His law, and how man should react to it. Its element of future prediction needs special care in interpretation. Predictions are divine and they have a definite holy purpose. Watch for the fulfillment of prophecies stated elsewhere in Scripture. Consider each prophecy in the light of its own setting and in harmony with all other Scriptures. Remember that many have both an immediate and a long range significance. Also remember that many figures of speech were used by the prophets to express them.
4. **Type.** A person, object, or incident prefiguring something greater and more exalted to follow. (Romans 5:14; Hebrews 7:17; 1 Corinthians 5:7; 1 Peter 1:19)

Questions for Review and Discussion

1. Define “literal” in relation to language.

2. Define "figurative" in relation to language.
3. How does figurative language:
 - a. Make truth stand out more vividly?
 - b. Conceal truth from its enemies?
4. Why is it impossible to interpret the language of Luke 9:60 literally?
5. What bearing do the customs of the times in which a figure of speech is used have on the meaning of that figure?
6. What is a parable? What is its purpose(s)? Why do you think it so little used today?
7. Can you think of any problems in the church today that are related to a misunderstanding or misapplication of metonymy? Explain.
8. Before the true meaning of a prophecy is determined, what must be taken into consideration?