

INTERPRETING FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Int.

1. Aim: To show how we properly interpret figurative language.
2. Mt. 13:34 Jesus used Parables to teach "All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables; and without a parable spake he not unto them:" Mark 4:34. "But without a parable spake he not unto them: and when they were alone, he expounded all things to his disciples."
3. Definition of the word "figurative" -- Symbolic, allegorical
 - a. "Transferred in some sense from literal or plain to abstract or hypothetical"
 - b. "The use of a word or expression in a different sense from that which properly belongs to it"
4. We all use figurative language
 - a. "He is about to eat me out of house and home" is a figure of speech we might use in talking about a young teenage boy who has a good appetite.
 - b. Understanding how to interpret figurative language is not just needful in Bible study, but in all matters of word communication.
 - c. But the need is greater in Bible study because the consequences of failure can be so much more serious.
 - d. Much of the Bible is written in figurative language, hence, the only way to understand this part of it, is to understand the laws governing such language.
 - e. Jesus often had the problem of people misinterpreting His figurative expressions:
 - i. Jn. 6:48-66 - "Eat my flesh and drink my blood..."
 - ii. Mt. 26:60-61 - "Destroy this temple and I will build it again in three days."

- f. Many false doctrines are based upon misinterpretation of figurative language
 - i. "This cup is the New Testament of my blood..." (Lk. 22:20)
 - ii. Transubstantiation: "This cup (content) is my blood"
 - iii. Mormons - God was once a man because he has "hands," "feet,"

5. Notice these facts about Figurative speech in the Bible:

Discussion

I. SOME COMMON FIGURES OF SPEECH DEFINED AND ILLUSTRATED:

A. Parable:

1. Literally means to throw along side: hence a parable is the use of something with which people are familiar to illustrate something with which they are not familiar.
2. Usually taken from the natural world, and is always within the realm of possibility, or even probability - "A sower went out to sow..." (Lk. 8:4-15).
3. A general rule of parable interpretation: The general idea is ordinarily the only one to be retained, while the details ought to be left aside.

B. Fable: -- Sometimes confused with a parable

1. Definition: "A feigned story or tale; a fictitious narration, intended to enforce some useful truth or precept."
2. "...attributes to things what does not belong to them in nature..."
3. Used to teach a lesson - or moral
4. Never in the realm of possibility. Judges 9:8-15 -- Jotham gave a story about Trees who anointed a king over them -- oldest fable --- used to show a blunder of someone

C. Simile:

1. A figure of speech comparing two essentially unlike things and often introduced by 'like' or 'as' -- used for a comparison
2. "The Spirit of God descended like a dove, and lighting upon him..." (Mt. 3:16)

D. Similitude:

1. Definition: A prolonged simile, usually contains its own explanation.
2. Mt. 7:24-27 v. 24 "Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man,
3. Many of the psalms are similitudes - Ps. 102:2-11

E. Metaphor:

1. Definition: A comparison implied but not expressed.
2. 2 Sam. 22:2 "The Lord (is) my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer..."
3. Lk. 13:31,32 "say to the fox..." Herod compared to a fox
4. Rom. 6:3,4 Col. 2:12 Buried in baptism

F. Metonymy:

1. Definition: One thing is said while another is meant.
2. Lk. 16:29 Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.
 - a. They didn't have Moses and the prophets, But they had their writings.
 - b. Acts 8:28 - Eunuch was "reading I saiah the prophet..."
 - c. Not I saiah, but his writings.

3. Contents for container
 - a. Cup - 1 Cor. 11:25
 - b. Church - is called the body of Christ

G. Synecdoche:

1. Definition: The whole is put for a part, or a part for the whole.
2. Mt. 3:5,6 - "Then went out to him Jerusalem, and Judea, and all the region round about Jordan, and were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins."
3. Not "Jerusalem and Judea" literally, but some of the people who lived there.
4. Acts 5:9 Not just the "feet" literally, but their whole bodies would be used to "carry thee out."

H. Irony:

1. Definition: Saying one thing while meaning the opposite.
2. 2 Cor. 11:19 - For ye suffer fools gladly, seeing ye (yourselves) are wise.

I. Sarcasm:

1. Definition: To speak bitterly or scornfully
2. Mk. 15:31,32 - "He saved others, himself he cannot save... Let Christ the King of Israel descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe..."

J. Hyperbole:

1. Definition: To overstate a point for emphasis.
2. Deut. 1:28 "Cities are great and fenced up to Heaven."
3. Judges 7:12 - camels without number

K. Personification:

1. Definition: Inanimate objects are addressed as if they were animate, or actual persons.
2. Pro. 8:1,2 Doth not wisdom cry? And understanding put forth her voice.

L. Interrogation: [Rhetoric]

1. Definition: Asking a question; not for the purpose of gaining information, but of affirming a proposition.
2. I Cor. 1:13 "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you?"

M. Allegory

1. A figurative sentence or discourse - a continued metaphor
2. Gal. 4:21-5:1 - Hagar and Sarah

N. Proverb

1. An old and common saying - Phrase often repeated
2. Short pithy statement containing a valuable thought
3. Proverbs 15:1 "A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger."

II. HOW TO DETERMINE WHEN LANGUAGE IS FIGURATIVE:

A. Observe the context.

1. Rev. 20 - 1000 years reign.
2. Is it literal or figurative? What does the context suggest?

B. When a literal interpretation would involve an impossibility.

1. Mt. 23:24 - "Ye blind guides which strain at the gnat and swallow a camel"
2. Impossible for man to swallow a camel. Figurative!!

C. When a literal interpretation of a passage would cause it to contradict another.

1. The 1000 yrs. reign of Rev. 20 could not be on the earth because the earth will melt with fervent heat when Jesus returns,
2. 2 Pet. 3:10 "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up."

D. When the scripture seems to demand actions that are wrong or forbid those that are good.

1. Lk. 14:26 "If any (man) come to me, and hate not his father, and mother...."
2. Other passages teach us to love our parents.

E. When it is said to be figurative:

1. Jesus often said he was speaking in parables
2. I Cor. 4:6, Paul said "These things...I have in a figure transferred to my self and Apollos."
3. Figure = to transfigure or disguise; fig. to apply (by accommodation): - transfer, transform (self)]
4. Gal. 4:24 calls it an allegory

F. Common sense:

1. Some passages are so obviously figurative that we don't need to be told.
2. I Cor. 3:2 - "I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able."

III. SOME RULES FOR INTERPRETING FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE:A. Let the author give his own interpretation:

1. Jn. 2:18-22
2. v.21 - But he spake of the temple of his body. - Jn. 7:38-39
3. v.39 - But this spake he of the Spirit

B. Keep the interpretation within the special scope of the writer:

1. Those who reigned with Christ in Rev. 20 were those who had been beheaded for the word of God. vs. 4
2. Nobody else is considered and it is a perversion to include anyone else.

3. To interpret this to mean that all saints of all time regardless of whether they were ever beheaded for the word of God are going to at some future time reign with Christ upon the literal earth, is to go far afield from this passage.

C. Figurative accounts should be interpreted in light of literal accounts of the same thing:

1. Figurative prophecy: Joel 2:28-32
2. Literal fulfillment: Acts 2:16-21

D. Gain a clear concept of the matters upon which the figures are based, such as:

1. The physical features of Bible lands:
 - a. "Cast thy bread upon the waters" (Eccl. 11:1) As Nile receded cast seed in it. Sow it in silt.
 - b. "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree; he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon" (Psa. 92:12) - Straight up 80' tall
2. The history of God's ancient people. -- Christ is a priest after the order of Melchizedek (Heb.7).
3. The daily lives and customs of the people of the Bible.
 - a. "I am the vine..." Very meaningful to vineyard keeper.
 - b. "I am the good shepherd..." Very Meaningful to a herdsman.

E. Never press a figure too far:

1. We are said to be "heirs of God" (Rom.8:17),
2. But this does not necessitate the death of God!

F. Understand that the same figures don't always mean the same thing:

1. LEAVEN is used in both a bad and good sense:
2. Bad - Matt.16:6; I Cor.5:6-7
3. Good - Matt.13:33
4. Jesus is said to be the Word of God, but the term "word" does not always refer to Jesus.

G. Avoid outrageous interpretations

1. EX. In a book entitled: The Letter of an Apostate Mormon to His Son, by Hans P.Frece, the following outrageous interpretation of the parable of the talents to justify polygamy appears:
2. "It is this way," said one man, "Jesus, in a parable said, In that day it will be as a man going into a far country. He called his servants and said to one of them, 'To you I will give five talents,' meaning five wives; to the other he gave two, and to the other one. When the Lord returned he found that the servant to whom he had given five wives had increased by rearing many children. The second servant had also as many children as possible by his two wives, but the man with one wife had been unfortunate. Then the Lord will take the one wife from the one man and give her to the man who has five, and who has increased his talents, and will say to him, 'well done thou good and faithful servant; take thou this other man's wife. Thou hast been diligent with a few wives, I will make you Lord over many.' But the one man who had one wife and did not increase his talents shall never be permitted to enter into the joy of his Lord."

H. Be consistent:

1. Be cautious about taking a word as literal when it is in a figurative context;
2. If one word is figurative, there is good reason to suspect that others are. (EX - Book of Revelation)

CONCLUSION

1. It is just as wrong to pervert figurative language as to pervert the literal.
2. We should not pervert either and instead speak as the oracles of God.
3. 2 Tim. 2:15 - rightly dividing the word of truth - handling aright
4. Read and Study the Bible

Source consulted - Hermeneutics by D.R. Dungan

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