

HOW TO RECOGNIZE & INTERPRET FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN THE BIBLE Text: 1 Cor. 4:6; 3:6-7

INTRO: The writers of the Bible, just like other writers, have often made use of various figures of speech. We need to note that when we say some of the language is figurative, we are NOT saying it has no meaning. We are actually saying that the language has a deeper meaning than would be gathered by a mere dictionary definition.

We ourselves use figurative language frequently. Some figures are so common that we tend to forget that they are figures.

In this lesson we will seek to state some rules that will help the Bible student to recognize & understand figurative language when they find it used in the Scriptures.

I. HOW TO RECOGNIZE FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE.

A. If the writer or speaker says the language is figurative, that settles it.

John 2:19-22, temple = body

JN 4:31-34, food (meat)=do God's will

John 7:37-39, rivers of living water = HS

1. Often the writer tells us that certain words were spoken in mockery, ridicule, etc. 1 K. 18:27; Acts 2:13

2. Several statements are plainly said to be parables, allegories, or prov.

- a. A parable is a story told to illustrate some point of teaching. Usually a parable is used to drive home one basic point.
- b. An allegory is a lengthened parable, in which several likenesses are utilized. Several of Jesus' parables could be more technically described as allegories. Gal. 4:23.
- c. A proverb is a short wise saying that time & experience have proven to be true most of the time. "A stitch in times saves 9." "Haste makes waste."
- d. Other figures clearly identified include riddles, Judg. 14:12-18; shadows, Col. 2:17; type/antitype, 1 Pet. 3:21

B. When a literal interpretation of 2 statements would present a contradiction between Scriptures, at least one of them must be figurative. Sword, LK 22:36-38

READ I CORINTHIANS 6:12-13

C. When a literal interpretation would involve an impossibility or absurdity, the statement should be considered figurative.

1. Caution is needed here, for with God "all things are possible" (MK 10:27)

2. But this rule cannot be ignored, for many statements could not possibly be meant literally.

Jer. 1:18, fortified city, iron pillar, bronze wall

Matt. 26:26-29

Psalm 18:2, God is a rock, fortress, shield, horn

D. Use of common sense will often settle if language is figurative or literal. Again caution is in order.

1. Often the context demands a figurative application. John 4:10-15

2. A definite statement is sometimes made when it is obvious that an indefinite is implied.

Dan. 1:20, ten times better than...
Psa 50:10, cattle on 1,000 hills...

2 Cor. 6:2, (Are we 2,000 years too late?)

E. Remember that literal language is the rule, figurative language is the exception. No passage or statement should be interpreted figuratively without valid reasons.

II. HOW TO INTERPRET FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE.

A. When possible, let the speaker or writer give his own interpretation. John 2:19-22; Ezek. 37

B. Keep in mind the overall purpose of the speaker or writer. Note the context.

He spoke another parable, because He was near Jerusalem & because they thought the kingdom of God would appear immediately. (Luke 19:11).

1. OT figures, prophecies, etc., should be understood in the light of NT explanations. Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:16

2. In parables, visions, etc., don't try to make every minute detail have special significance.

ILLUSTRATION: "He runs like lightning."

a. Does he light up the sky when he runs?

b. Does he run 186,000 mps?

3. Remember that a word or phrase used a certain way in one context will not necessarily have the same meaning in a different context.

Seed: Gen 1:12; LK 8:11; MT
13:38; Gal 3:16
Literal, Word, people, Jesus

C. Compare other statements which speak of the same subjects. Interpret the figurative in the light of the literal.

1. "All" were baptized by John, JN 3:5-6
2. Apostles baptized more than John did, JN 4:1-2

3. Some rejected John's baptism, LK
7:30

4. We could readily infer that many also refused to be baptized by the apostles, JN 9:28

NOTE: Obviously the "all" in MT
3:5 is used in a figurative sense.

D. A knowledge of history & biography can help us to understand certain figures, signs, & symbols. Dan. 2:31-44

CONCLUSION: These suggestions, properly applied, will go a long way toward helping us to recognize & interpret figures, symbols, & other word pictures in the Scriptures.

La Porte, TX, December 3, 1978

Bible Camp, Sabinal, TX, June 14, 1979

La Porte, TX, April 24, 1983

Exton, PA, October 27, 1985

Jonestown, TX, June 19, 1988

Shippensburg, PA, September 25, 1991 (meeting)

Shiloh, Mexia, TX, February 12, 19, 1992

Imhoff Ave., Port Arthur, TX, August 4, 1993 (meeting)

Susquehanna, Marietta, PA, January 11, 1998

Susquehanna, Marietta, PA, January 6, 2002

Milton, VT, June 26, 2002 (meeting)