

Week #4 – Interpretation – What Does it Mean?, Part 2

Figures of Speech

A figure of speech refers to any words (or sentences) that are used with a **meaning** other than their literal use.

Q: *What are some popular figures of speech in the English language? (What are some of the strangest?)*

Why Do We Use Figures of Speech?

1. Because human language contains non-literal **talk**.
2. Because they can **emphasize** a point (Matthew 23:27 – “Whitewashed tombs”)
3. Because they can move us to **action**.
4. Because they can help us **remember** (Ex: Jesus’ “I AM” statements in *John*)
5. Because they can **illustrate** a point.

Guidelines for Interpreting Figures of Speech:

1. Determine if a **figure** is used.
2. Determine the **image** and what it stands for.
3. State the **purpose** of the figure.
4. Don’t assume that figures mean the same **thing** in all contexts.
5. Don’t get **carried away!** (This is where many interpretation errors happen!)

Summary: Interpret by using the literal meaning of the words. Use the figurate meaning, however if the literal meaning is impossible, if it proposes something immoral, or if it contradicts the context, other Scripture, or doctrine.

Commonly Used Figures of Speech (From *Living by the Book*, pp. 266-7)

Anthropomorphism – The attribution of human features or actions to God

“The Lord’s hand is not so short that it cannot save; neither is His ear so dull that it cannot hear” (*Isaiah 59:1*).

Apostrophe – Addressing a thing as if it were a person, or an absent or imaginary person as if he were present

“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (*1 Corinthians 15:55*).

Euphemism – The use of a less offensive expression to indicate a more offensive one.

“Would that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves” (*Galatians 5:2*).

Hyperbole – Exaggeration to say more than is literally meant.

“I robbed other churches, taking wages from them to serve you” (*2 Corinthians 11:8*).

Hypocatastasis – A comparison in which likeness is implied rather than stated directly.

“Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy” (*Luke 12:1*).

Idiom – An expression peculiar to a particular people.

“And [Samson] said, ‘I will go in to my wife in her room’” (*Judges 15:1*).

Merism – A substitution of two contrasting or opposite parts for the whole.

“Thou dost know when I sit down and when I rise up” (*Psalms 39:2*).

Metaphor – A comparison in which one thing represents another.

“You are the light of the world” (*Matthew 5:14*).

Paradox – A statement that seems absurd, self-contradictory, or contrary to logical thought.

“Whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it” (*Matthew 16:25*).

Personification – Ascribing human characteristics or actions to inanimate objects or animals.

“The moon will be abashed and the sun ashamed” (*Isaiah 24:23*).

Rhetorical Question – A question that requires no response, yet forces one to answer mentally and consider its ramifications.

“In God I have put my trust, I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?” (*Psalms 56:11*).

Simile – A comparison using “like” or “as.”

“He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water” (*Psalms 1:3*).

Commonly Misinterpreted Texts

1) *2 Chronicles 7:14* – Will our land be healed?

2) *Mark 10:25* – Where is the “eye of the needle?”

3) *John 3:16* – God loving the world “so much?” “Whoever believes?”

4) *Philippians 4:13* – Success or Contentment?

5) *Revelation 3:15-16* – Is “cold” water good or bad? Is it worse than “lukewarm” water?

6) *Revelation 3:20* – Salvation, or something else?

Difficult Passages of the Bible

1) *Exodus 7:13* – Who hardened Pharaoh’s heart?

2) *Exodus 24:9-11* – Who can see God and live? (cf. *Exodus 33:20*)?

3) *Deuteronomy 20:16-17* – Is God’s commandment cruel here?

4) *Matthew 10:34* – Jesus brings the sword? Isn’t He the “Prince of Peace?”

5) *James 2:24* – Are we justified by our works? How?

Home Work Assignments – Week 4:

#1 – Psalm 139

Study Psalm 139 (using the techniques of Observation first, of course), which is filled with figurative language. Using the principles discussed in our lesson on Figures of Speech, try to figure out what David is talking about as he writes. Make a note of the figures of speech that are used as well as what they mean.

Next Week: Application – How Does it Work?, Part 1

Obstacles to applying the Bible

What happens when we fail to apply the Bible to our lives?