

## Using The Standard Properly: Understanding Figures of Speech

Franklin Church of Christ  
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### Introduction:

The Bible is a fascinating book. It is God's communication to us. Yet, the more we study, the more we realize that God did not intend to spoon feed us. He intends for us to work at understanding what He has given (**II Peter 3:16**). Therefore, we are not surprised to find all kinds of churches that claim to teach just the Bible teaching all manner of different doctrines. We have already discussed this in lessons past and have learned that not only must we use the proper standard, we must use the standard properly. In various lessons, we have learned that includes rightly dividing between the two covenants, distinguishing between the different kinds of literature God used, knowing the simple rules for Bible study and knowing how to establish Biblical authority. Further, if we are going to use the standard properly, we must learn the variety of ways in which God employed figures of speech.<sup>1</sup>

### Discussion:

- I. What is a figure of speech?
  - A. Figures of speech, or figurative language, are not speculative uses of language bereft of meaning. Rather, they are specific uses of language that are extremely well-defined and used with purpose.
  - B. Further, a figure of speech is not a lie, nor an absurdity, nor a mistake. Though we today often use figures without even realizing it, figures are used in the Bible for very specific reasons. If we are going to understand the Bible, we must understand these figures and their purposes.
  - C. "A FIGURE is simply a word or sentence thrown into a peculiar *form*, different from its original or simplest meaning or use" (p. xv). That is, a figure of speech is simply using words in unnatural ways. Whether we realize it or not, we use figures all the time. When the sports announcer says, "Wow, he fired that pitch like a bullet," or, "He threw hail Mary into the endzone," he is using figurative language. When we say, "My yard was so dry it just drank the rain up," we are using figurative language. When Muhammad Ali said, "I float like a butterfly, sting like a bee. Your hands can't hit what your eyes can't see," he was using figurative language.
- II. Why does the Bible use figurative language?
  - A. We must first recognize that figurative language does not cheapen the scriptures. Bullinger wrote, "Whereas to-day '*Figurative language*' is ignorantly spoken of as though it made less of the meaning and deprived the words of their power and force...implying that its meaning is weakened, or that it has quite a different meaning, or that it has no meaning at all. But the very opposite is the case" (p. vi).
  - B. God used figurative language because we use figurative language. It stands to reason that if God is going to communicate to us, He is going to do so in ways familiar to us.
  - C. God used figurative language because it adds depth, color and intensity to the language (notice that I just used figurative language). Frankly, a Bible without figures of speech would be intensely boring. In **Psalm 51:7-8**, David could have simply said, "Please, forgive me and help me to be happy again." How drab that is compared to "Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness, Let the bones which You have broken rejoice."
  - D. God used figurative language to emphasize His message and attract our attention to it. He used figurative language to make us want to work at understanding His message. If His message was just plain and spoon fed to us, we would dutifully work our way through it but would probably never have our attention focused squarely on God's word. Figurative language pulls us out of mental laziness and causes us to question and dig. For instance, if, in **Matthew 16:25**, Jesus had said, "Whoever focuses his attention on preserving what he wants, desires and thinks is important will go to hell for eternity. But whoever is willing to focus his attention on what I want will go to heaven," we would probably read straight through with the same inattentive reading

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the research and definitions for this sermon come from *Figures of Speech Used In The Bible*, E.W. Bullinger, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1968. Page numbers in parenthesis refer to pages in this book.

we apply to the daily paper. But when He said, “Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it,” we sit up and take notice. What on earth does that mean? On the surface it doesn’t make any sense. We have to dig deeply to get it.

- E. God used figurative language to separate His disciples from the world. Jesus explained this in **Matthew 13:10-17**. The disciples wondered why Jesus didn’t just speak plainly instead of using the difficult symbolism of parables. Jesus explained that it allows those who are willing to see and hear to do so. Those who are unwilling to work at it will hear but not understand and see but not perceive.

III. Figures of speech used in the Bible—Bullinger’s book catalogues more than 200 distinct figures, some with over 30 varieties. If you want to get that in depth in your study, which would be good for you, purchase his book. Today we will examine a very few of the most common figures.

A. **Symbol**

1. “A material Object substituted for a moral or spiritual Truth” (p. 770). While the term “Symbol” is used rather broadly today, for our study we must not let the word “Symbol” become synonymous with “figurative language.” We are using it to specifically refer to saying one thing, typically speaking of something material, but really referring to something else, typically something spiritual.
2. Of all the figures of speech, this is the one that is most difficult. Symbols are very often culturally based. Because a certain culture is familiar with the connection between the Symbol and the reality, it makes sense to them easily. Since we are separated by two thousand years and half a globe from the Biblical people, we struggle with their Symbols. One thing about which we must be certain, when a Symbol was used, the Biblical writer only meant what he was symbolizing. We are not allowed to claim a passage or word is a symbol and then make it mean whatever we want. It must still fit within the context of scripture.
3. Examples of Symbol are most easily recognized within the parables. In **Matthew 13:3-9**, Jesus spoke of a farmer sowing seed. But in **vss. 18-23**, He explained that He was actually speaking of different kinds of people hearing the message of the Gospel. Another example is in **John 2:19-22**. Jesus said the temple would be destroyed and rebuilt in three days. The text explains He was actually speaking of His death and resurrection. Interestingly, the disciples did not even understand this Symbol until after Jesus’ resurrection.

B. **Metaphor/Simile**

1. A Metaphor is “a Declaration that one Thing is (or represents) another” (p. 735). A Simile is “a Declaration that one Thing resembles another” (p. 726). Metaphors and Similes are very similar. The way they were explained in school was that these two figures of speech connect two different objects, but Simile will always use “like” or “as”.
2. When Muhammad Ali said that he would float like a butterfly and sting like a bee. He was using Simile. When we say, “Be careful, that guy is a snake,” we are using Metaphor.
3. Jesus used Metaphors in **Matthew 5:13-14**, “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world.” He used Metaphor when He told the Pharisees to go speak to Herod, but said, “Go and tell that fox...” When David wrote **Psalms 1:3**, saying the righteous “will be like a tree firmly planted by the streams of water,” he was using Simile. When Jesus told the disciples to be “wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (**Matthew 10:16**), He used Simile.
4. It is especially important to understand this when discussing the Lord’s Supper. Jesus was using a Metaphor when He spoke of the bread and said, “This is my body,” and spoke of the fruit of the vine saying, “This is my blood” (**Matthew 26:26-28**).

C. **Hyperbole**

1. “When more is said than is literally meant” (p. 423). This can also be simply called Exaggeration. It is most often used to clarify or drive home a spiritual point with force.
2. When Muhammad Ali said, “Your hands can’t hit what your eyes can’t see,” he was using Hyperbole. Certainly, he could be seen. But he was emphasizing how quick footed he was.
3. In **Luke 14:26**, when Jesus said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple,” He was using Hyperbole, exaggerating to make a point. In **Matthew 5:29**, when

Jesus said, "If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you," He was using Hyperbole.

4. This is especially important to note when we study **Psalm 51:5**, a passage most often used to teach Original Sin. When David said, "I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me." He is using Hyperbole to explain how utterly sinful he was and how much he needed forgiveness.

#### D. Personification

1. "Things represented as Persons" (p. 861). Bullinger further defined this, writing, "A figure by which things are represented or spoken of as persons or, by which we attribute intelligence, by words or actions, to inanimate objects or abstract ideas."
2. For instance, when we earlier mentioned the ground drinking the rain we were using Personification.
3. When the Proverbialist spoke of wisdom in **Proverbs 1:20-33**, he was using Personification. When God told Cain that the voice of Abel's blood was crying out from the ground in **Genesis 4:10**, He was using Personification.

#### E. Metonymy

1. "The Change of one Noun for another Related Noun" (p. 539). The word "Metonymy" literally means "to change the name." Metonymy is a kind of symbolism in which one subject is used to speak of a greater or lesser subject because the two are related.
2. A great example of Metonymy is the famous statement, "The pen is mightier than the sword." This statement is not comparing pens and swords, but writing versus fighting.
3. When Abraham told the rich man in **Luke 16:29** that his brothers "have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them," he was using Metonymy. Moses and the prophets were dead. Abraham was actually speaking of the writings of Moses and the prophets. In **Romans 12:1**, when Paul taught us to present our "bodies a living and holy sacrifice," he was by Metonymy actually referring to our lives and actions.
4. This is especially important to remember when reading passages like **1 John 4:1**, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone into the world." When John said test the spirits, he was, by Metonymy, referring to those who claim to be prophets and their teaching, not to literal spirits. False prophets claim to receive revelation from spirits and Christians are to test what is taught.

#### F. Oxymoron

1. "A Wise saying that seems Foolish" (p. 816). These are statements that on the surface do not make sense or appear to be self-contradictory, but when the points behind the statements are understood are extremely profound. This is accomplished by combining terms or phrases that seem incongruous.
2. When we say things like "kill them with kindness" or "tough love," we are using Oxymorons.
3. Jesus used an Oxymoron in **Matthew 16:25** when He said, "Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it." The living sacrifice of **Romans 12:1** is also an Oxymoron. Several of the Beatitudes in **Matthew 5:3-12** are Oxymorons.

#### G. Ellipsis

1. "The figure is a peculiar form given to a passage when a word or words are omitted; words which are necessary for the grammar, but are not necessary for the sense" (p. 1). This is a tough one for people to grasp and yet we use it frequently ourselves without thinking about it. This simply means leaving out words that are understood because of the context.
2. A great example is when Tessa and I are the only ones in the room and I will simply say, "Go clean your room." Grammatically, I left out the subject of that sentence. Who is supposed to clean their room? This is a fact which Tessa has clearly picked up on because she will always respond, "Me?" which is also an Ellipsis, leaving out any real question words. I will typically respond, "No, the other person standing next to you." The context of the situation supplies the missing words.
3. When Jesus said "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal,"

in **Matthew 6:19-20**, He was not saying that we must always keep a zero balance in our bank accounts and that we can never own anything. This is Ellipsis. Interestingly, this Ellipsis causes a Hyperbole, the missing words cause an exaggeration of the point. Jesus was saying “Do not merely store up treasure on earth, but primarily or more importantly, store up treasure in heaven.” In **Matthew 10:34**, when Jesus said, “Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword,” He was using Ellipsis. Certainly Jesus was coming to bring Peace. His statement meant, “I did not come to bring peace only, but also a sword.”

4. This is especially important to remember when we read **I Corinthians 1:17**. Many have misunderstood Paul’s point when he said, “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel...” On the surface, we may wonder why Paul did what Christ did not send him to do in **I Corinthians 1:14-16**. His statement is an Ellipsis meaning, “Christ did not send me merely to baptize, but primarily to preach the gospel.” His point being that he could let others do the baptizing, but he could not leave teaching simply up to others, he was sent to teach.

### **Conclusion:**

The language of Scripture is far richer than we might imagine on the surface. God wants us to work to understand His will. Therefore, we must not only use the proper standard, but we must use the standard properly. To do so, we must come to grips with the way God uses language. He is making a distinction between those who are willing to work to understand and those who are not. Let us work to understand what God has said. Where He has spoken figuratively, let us work to understand His real meaning. But let’s be honest. We must work, we are not allowed to wave off the literal by claiming it is figurative. At the same time, we are not allowed to misrepresent the figurative by claiming it is literal. This is not an easy task, but it is a necessary one. The only way you can accomplish it is by simply getting into your Bible, reading it and studying it.