
BIBLE TALK

Welcome to “Bible Talk.” This week we will continue a study we began last time about how to study the word of God effectively. That is, rules of Bible study which will enable us to reach the interpretation which God intended.

In our first study, we mentioned the need to become an avid Bible reader and then we discussed **Rule #1: “When reading a passage, ask who is doing the speaking and to whom were the words spoken to.”** We pointed out that not everyone whose words are recorded were good people. We also pointed out that even when a good person is speaking, their words were not always addressed to all people. Sometimes God spoke to specific groups of people and it is a serious mistake to apply what the Lord said to groups He was not speaking to.

RULE #2

Now we come to:

Rule #2: When reading a passage, we must consider whether figurative or literal language is being used.

The Bible is written in both prose and poetic forms. Sometimes Bible writers would use exaggeration or hyperbole. Similes and metaphors also abound in the pages of the Bible. We must recognize these figures and take them into consideration when studying a passage.

We may not arbitrarily declare a passage “figurative” just because a literal interpretation would contradict something we believe in. There are rules which we must go by – rules which we all recognize when reading secular books.

Here are some indications that figurative language is being used:

- 1) If the literal meaning of a word or sentence involves an impossibility, figurative language is being used.**

For example, Jeremiah 1:18 says, “*For behold, I have made you this day A fortified city and an iron pillar, And bronze walls against the whole land.*” Literally we know this is not true.

Instead, Jeremiah was made to resemble these things in some respects. He would be strong and immovable like a fortified city and an iron pillar.

2) If the literal meaning makes a contradiction, figurative language is being used.

Acts 9:7 says, "And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, **hearing a voice** but seeing no one." When the same story is repeated in Acts 22:9 we read, "And those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they **did not hear the voice** of Him who spoke to me." A literal interpretation causes a needless contradiction. If we take Acts 22:9 figuratively, then the passages harmonize and do not contradict. To "not hear a voice" is often used in a figurative sense of "not understanding."

To illustrate, we often say to one another, "Would you repeat what you just said; I didn't hear you." When we say this, we do not mean we heard no sound, but we mean we did not understand the sound. This is the case with the two passages we just noticed. The men present heard a voice, but they did not understand what the voice was saying. Figurative language is clearly detected by using this observation.

3) When the literal interpretation requires that a sinful action be performed, figurative language is being used.

Luke 14:26 says, "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." If this is taken literally, then we are being told to do something sinful. This indicates that the word "hate" is being used figuratively in the sense of "to love less." Jesus is not saying that men must literally hate their parents, their wife, children, brothers and sisters. But He is saying that we must love them less than we love Him. Jesus must be first in our lives.

4) When a Bible writer declares a figure is being used, then figurative language is being used.

John 2:19 reads, "Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." We are told plainly that this was figurative language in verse 21 where the scripture continues, "He was speaking of the temple of His body." The Jews were pretending that Jesus was speaking literally, but He was not. In fact, the Jews were being deceptive. They knew exactly what the Lord meant, but they were pretending that they didn't understand. This becomes evident when we read Matthew 27:63 and the Jews said to Pilate, "Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise.'" This makes it obvious that they understood Jesus was using figurative language all along.

5) When something is said in mockery, figurative language is being used.

Acts 2:13 the scriptures record, "*Others mocking said, "They are full of new wine."*" This is not literal. It is said in mockery. New wine is merely grape juice. The disciples of Jesus drank non-fermented beverages and they were being mocked here. It is a great mistake to take this passage, which was spoken in mockery, and conclude that new wine is an intoxicating drink and to further conclude that the disciples of the Lord would drink fermented wine.

6) When the definite is put for the indefinite number, then figurative language is being used.

Genesis 31:7 Jacob is recorded as saying, "*Your father has deceived me and changed my wages **ten times**, but God did not allow him to hurt me.*" This is figurative language. Jacob means simply that his wages were changed many times.

Often this is the case in the Bible: definite numbers are used, but indefinite numbers are meant. Sometimes parents will say to their children, "I've told you a thousand times to pick your room up." We all understand this is not literal. In the same way the Bible often uses a definite number for an indefinite number. You might consider this when you read Revelation 20:2 about saints reigning with Christ for a thousand years. Could it be a definite number is being used for an indefinite number in this passage? We think this is a very real possibility.

Our time is up for now. We will consider some more rules about Bible study next time.

Call back next week as we continue our study of the word of God.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Well ... thanks for listening to our message this week. We invite you to visit our web site www.WillOfTheLord.com. There you may download the notes and the audio file of the message you just listened to.

Call again next week when we consider a new subject on ***Bible Talk***.

ⁱ Taken from D. R. Dungan's, Hermeneutics, p. 11.