



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

How to Understand and Interpret the Bible (Hermeneutics) Lesson #12

Six Principles of Biblical Interpretation

Principle Five: The Only Meaning of the Words Is the Simple, Plain Meaning

Figurative language

There are two main ways of understanding a Bible passage: literally or figuratively. For example, in Luke 13:31-32 we read that the Pharisees told Jesus: **“Herod wants to kill you.”** In reply Jesus said to them: **“Go, tell that fox, ‘Behold I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow.’”** Jesus called Herod a fox. Should we understand this literally or figuratively? Of course, King Herod was not actually the animal we call a fox, but Jesus called him a fox because he had certain qualities of a fox.

What the Pharisees said to Jesus, however, must be understood literally. Even if Herod did not really want to kill Jesus, the Pharisees wanted Jesus to believe that Herod did want to kill Him so that he would leave their region. But Jesus’ statement calling Herod a fox was clearly not to be understood literally. In most cases the context will make it easy for us to determine whether we should understand something literally or figuratively.

As a general rule, we must always start with the literal meaning. If there is no reason to understand the passage figuratively, we should understand it in a literal sense.

The Bible uses figurative language to help make the truth more vivid and memorable. For example, Jesus could have said to His disciples: “Only I can make you live a godly life.” But instead, He used figurative language and said: **“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing”** (John 15:5).

Psalms 23 pictures the Lord as our Shepherd. There are other passages that speak of believers in Jesus as being His sheep. This picture may not mean very much to someone who has never seen a sheep or been around a shepherd. In the same way, there are some pictures and comparisons in the Bible that we do not easily understand because we are no longer familiar with the customs of those times.

It is important to remember that when the Bible makes a comparison, there is usually only one point of comparison. This is true of the comparisons we make as well. If we say that someone is as tall as a tree, we are only talking about his height. We do not mean that he looks like a tree in appearance. We must be careful not to stretch the comparisons we find in the Bible beyond the one point of the comparison.

Jesus told many parables about earthly things in order to explain spiritual things. It is important that we do not attempt to interpret every detail in a parable, but limit ourselves to the point of comparison that Jesus is making. For example, in Jesus’ parable of the ten virgins waiting for the bridegroom (Matthew 25:1-13), there is one point of comparison. These virgins were to be ready for the coming of the bridegroom at any time. This shows us that we also are to be ready for the coming of our Lord on the last day. We should not, however, try to find meaning in the fact that five were wise and five were foolish. We cannot say, for example, that this means that half the population on the last day will be watchful and prepared, and the other half will not be ready. This is not the point of the parable. We can be led to many false ideas if we try to interpret every detail. There are a few times, however, when Jesus Himself explains the details of His parables to His disciples. We can trust the interpretation of these details because God Himself has given us the explanation.

To better understand of the Bible, it is helpful to become acquainted with common figures of speech, for example: simile (comparison), metaphor, irony, hyperbole, and personification. The Bible writers use of all of these figures of speech in their writings. Jesus Himself loved to use picture language, so He often taught in parables. There is only one allegory in the Bible. It is clearly labeled as **“symbolic.”** Paul compares the law and the Gospel by using the example of Abraham’s two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, and their two wives (Galatians 4:21-31).

The Bible also uses type and antitype. A type is a person, item, or event that is a picture of something to come in the future. The fulfillment of the type is called the antitype. For example, the lamb that was killed by the Israelites on the day of the Passover was a type of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. Jesus is therefore the antitype. The blood of the Passover lamb that was smeared on the Israelite doors saved them from death. That was a picture of the blood of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, which saves us from sin, death, and the devil. We can be sure that the Passover Lamb was a type of Christ, because the apostle Paul writes: **“Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us”** (1 Corinthians 5:7). We stand on safe ground when we teach the types of Christ that are specifically mentioned as such in the Bible, although God may have intended other things to be types of Christ as well, even though they are not specifically mentioned as such.

These are just a few of the important points of language and grammar that are helpful in understanding the Bible. The best way to gain a better understanding of the Bible is to read it and study it diligently and to ask the Holy Spirit to open our understanding. If it is possible for you to become familiar with the Bible languages of Hebrew and Greek, you should make the effort, even though it requires time and persistence and the blessing of God to become skilled in your knowledge. Even more important however, is it that we remain humbly faithful and obedient to everything that the Bible teaches us.

Questions

1. What is the difference between a literal and a figurative understanding of a Bible passage?
2. What is the danger of understanding a literal passage figuratively?
3. What is the danger of understanding a figurative passage literally?
4. Why is it important to find the point of comparison in a parable?
5. What is meant by type and antitype?
6. Try to find examples of simile and metaphor in the Bible.
7. Choose a parable of Jesus and state the point of comparison.
8. Is it possible to become an expert in the Bible languages without being a believer in Jesus? Explain your answer.