

LESSON 6

**Principles of Understanding Scripture (5)
Background Information for the Teacher**

Objectives:

1. The student can explain how we know whether to take something figuratively or literally.
2. The student can name five common figures of speech in the Bible and can define each.
3. The student can name an occasion in the Bible when each of the five figures named is used.

Preparation:

1. Have ready to distribute Written Review No. 5.
2. Have ready to distribute Worksheet No. 6. Fill out one for yourself.
3. Have sufficient Bibles and pens for the class.
4. Have access to a chalkboard or overhead projector.

Theme: To understand how to interpret Scripture, we need to know when figurative language is used and how to interpret it.

Lesson Plan for the Teacher

Introduction: (10 minutes)

1. Call the role and plan contact with those who are absent.
2. Make necessary announcements.
3. Songs and prayer as desired.
4. Give the answers to Written Review No. 5. No. 1—Word study book, commentary, Bible dictionary or encyclopedia, compare English translations, concordance, other passages that use the word, Bible software packages. No. 2—context. No. 3—c. No. 4—b. No. 5—d. Discuss briefly the questions asked about Ephesians 6:1-4. Some words which should be defined are obey, honor, exasperate, bring them up, training, instruction. This section connects with the previous chapter because Paul gives a sequence of three relationships in which there is a responsibility of leadership and of submission: husband-wife; parent-child; master-slave. The "who" in 6:1-4 is parents and children. The "what" is bringing them up and obey. The "why" is "it is right," "first commandment with promise," and so as not to "exasperate" the children.

Learning Experiences (about 30 minutes)

1. **Q:** What are the principles of interpretation we have studied so far? **A:** Conditions, Genre, Context, Speaker/Audience, Words, and Syntax.
2. Today we take up the seventh of our ten: Figures. The Bible makes use of figurative language which we must



decode in order to understand the message given. Before looking at specific types of figures and how to interpret them, let's look first at the whole question of figurative language. **Q:** Do we use figures of speech in our everyday conversation? **A:** Yes, a lot more than we may think. **Q:** Can you give some examples of figurative expressions in our conversations? **A:** (Let the class come up with some. Here are some illustrations as you may need them to explore this question.) "I'm freezing to death" actually means I'm uncomfortably cool but no one calls the paramedics. "I'm burning up" means I'm warmer than I would like to be but certainly is not a request to call the Fire Department. "Faster than a speeding bullet" may be literal for Superman but for a speedy tight end, it is only figurative. An athlete may be "big as a barn," "loose as a goose," "a lean, mean machine," or may "fly like a butterfly and sting like a bee." A driver may be "burning up the road," "flying low," or "high as a kite." The point is that our regular language is filled with figures and we are able to properly switch from literal to figurative and to interpret them.

3. **Q:** When such statements as the above are made, how do we sort through what we hear to know that these are figures and not to be taken literally. **A:** We apply a rule something like this: if a statement, on its face, is obviously impossible or beyond our belief, then we switch from our literal hat to our figurative one to see if we find a better fit. If, for example, the person is obviously not on fire, then we take the "burning up" words to be figurative. Since we know that no person can possibly be "big as a barn," we switch to the figurative style when someone uses such words. And we make this switch back and forth from figurative to literal frequently in many conversations.
4. The Bible is similar to most other written material. It is meant to be taken literally except when something appears beyond reality if taken literally. When it is, we are expected to switch to figurative. Just a couple of examples. Jesus says "I am the water of life," and we know He is not water. So we look for something about Jesus that could be like water and we find it in seeing that just as our physical bodies cannot live without water, so our spiritual nature cannot live without Jesus. For another case, David said, "The Lord is my shepherd." Obviously David was not literally a sheep lying down in a green pasture and God was not some man walking around with a crook in his hand. So, the words are figurative, intended to convey that God treats us even better than a shepherd treats his sheep.
5. Some books have itemized over a hundred different types of figures of speech. While the Bible uses many types, most of them fall into one of six categories. So we'll look at these six. Learn their definitions and an example of each from the



Bible. Write these on your worksheet to help you remember them.

- a. **Metaphor.** A direct comparison of two unlike objects. If I compare a man with a man, that is not a metaphor, but if I compare a man with bread, that comparison is of two unlike objects and so qualifies as a metaphor. **Q:** Does the Bible compare a man to bread? **A:** Yes. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life." Just as bread is an essential to our physical diet, so Jesus is essential to our spiritual lives. This is a metaphor because it makes the comparison directly: Jesus is bread. Another example of a metaphor is Jesus' statement that Christians "are the light of the world" or "the salt of the earth." Christians are neither literal light nor literal salt, but there is a sense in which we are "light" for those in the darkness of sin and "salt" for those who need a "preservative" for their lives. So in the metaphor, one object is said to be another directly. You are leaven, you are a vine that bears fruit, you are a shepherd to the flock. So the Bible makes heavy use of metaphors.
- b. **Simile.** An indirect comparison of two unlike objects. Simile is much like a metaphor but uses the word "like" or "as" in the formula. This makes the comparison more indirectly. **Q:** Look at Psalm 1 and find an example of a simile. **A:** "Like a tree." "Like the chaff." Read James 1:6. **Q:** What is the simile? **A:** "Like a wave of the sea." So the metaphor and simile both compare things essentially unlike but the metaphor makes the statement directly while the simile uses "like" or "as."
- c. **Parable.** The parable is an expanded simile. It uses the word "like" or "as" but makes a comparison that normally extends over several points or in a story form. So, Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed or like a sower going out to sow. Often the parable is based on some common event in life such as farming or caring for the household. Its comparison allows the reader to picture some spiritual truth through a well-known experience of life. **Q:** Name some other parables that compare spiritual truths to some common thing of life. **A:** Treasure, pearl, a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, an unjust judge, etc. A parable makes one key point and in interpreting it, we should look for the essential lesson its author wants us to see. **Q:** What is the essential lesson in the parable of the sower? **A:** That people can respond to the seed of the word in different ways. **Q:** What is the essential



lesson of the parable of the 10 virgins? **A:** Be ready, for we do not know when the Lord will come.

- d. **Metonymy.** Substitution of one word for another with which it has some association. This is a very frequent figure in our speech. **Q:** Have you ever read Shakespeare? **A:** Yes. **Q:** Did you read his eyes, or his hands, or his hair? **A:** No. We often put the name of the author for what he wrote and so instead of saying, "Have you read what Shakespeare wrote," we say, "Have you read Shakespeare." On the news today you may hear, "Washington said today . . ." **Q:** Is that George Washington? **A:** No. We commonly use the place where something is said (Washington), for the one who said it. So, "Washington said." These are cases of putting one word for another word with which it is associated.

Some Bible examples of metonymy are:

1. Look at Proverbs 12:19. **Q:** What words here are used in a metonymy? **A:** "Lips" stands for what lips do—the message they speak. And the "tongue," likewise, stands for what the tongue says.
 2. Look at 1 Corinthians 11:27. **Q:** What word is used as a metonymy? **A:** "Cup." **Q:** Do we actually drink the cup? **A:** No, "cup" is used here in the sense that the container stands for the contents. We don't drink the container, but we drink what the container holds. So container for the contents. The emphasis in the Lord's Supper should be on the contents, the fruit of the vine which represents Christ's blood, and not on the container.
 3. We often sing songs about the cross. "I love the old, rugged cross." But we really don't love the cross; rather, we love what the cross stands for. "Cross," then, becomes a metonymy, standing for the forgiveness that was made possible through the crucifixion.
- e. **Hyperbole.** Exaggeration to emphasize not to deceive. One of the most common figures in our ordinary language is hyperbole. "I've told you a million times not to do that." "He drives like a maniac." "I wouldn't touch that with a ten foot pole." And a million more. We'll that's probably a hyperbole. The Bible makes frequent use of this figure. **Q:** Can you think of an example in the Bible of hyperbole? **A:** (See what the class comes up with. Here are some you might mention.) God told Abraham that his descendents would be as numerous as the stars in the heavens and the sand on the seashore. "All Judea" went out to hear John—



but surely someone was sick or at work that day. Jesus statements about “cut off your hand” or “pluck out your eye” are samples of hyperbole. Also He used hyperbole in speaking of the beam that was in your eye or the camel going through the eye of the needle. What the speaker says is not literally true, but it is stated in such a way and in such a context that we know the exaggeration is not meant to deceive but to emphasize the point. So in the Scriptures as in life, we get a heightened sense of the meaning through this use of figurative language.

- f. Personification. Giving human characteristics to something that is not living. Read Psalm 19:1. **Q:** What, in this verse, is given human qualities? **A:** The heavens and skies are said to speak. Read Ezekiel 36:1. **Q:** To whom does God speak as if they had ears? **A:** The mountains of Israel.
6. We have discussed six of the most common figures of speech in the Bible and shown cases from Scripture where they were used. You should now have a list of these on your worksheet for reference and for study.

Application: (3 minutes)

1. Interpreting figures of speech is very important to understanding Scripture. Of course books like Daniel and Revelation are filled with figurative language and take some special effort to understand. But even in the simplest narrative, figurative language can occur. As Jesus and His apostles, for example, are having their last meal together before His death, Jesus takes the unleavened bread that was on the Passover table and says to them, “This is my body.” Great controversy has raged over this simple statement. Did Jesus mean that they were to eat of His actual body? Did He mean that the bread was transformed into His flesh and that we were eating, then, of His actual body? Is His body somehow just “with” the bread in a kind of mystical presence? Or was Jesus using just a simple figure of speech, a metaphor, to say that the bread represented His body and when we eat it we are to remember the death of His body on our behalf? The answer to this question lies, as interpretations so often do, in asking the question, “What would those who first received this message have thought it meant?” It is highly doubtful that His apostles, mostly simple fishermen not trained in deep theological thought, would have understood anything but the simple metaphor that the bread could remind them of His body and the fruit of the vine could remind them of His blood. When Paul told the story in 1 Corinthians 11:24, he simply quoted Jesus as saying, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.”



2. Let this lesson on figures of speech make us all more alert to the use of figures in the Bible. And we can also note figures of speech in the songs we sing. Grasping the figures in our songs will give us a deeper appreciation of their meaning.

Assignment: (2 minutes)

1. Study your worksheet and be ready for the written review next week.
2. Study 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 which provides a lengthy discussion built on a metaphor. Write down the metaphor and then write down all the points of comparison between the two items being compared.



**WRITTEN REVIEW NO. 5
(To be used with Lesson No. 6)**

1. List three places you could go besides a dictionary to learn the meaning of a Bible word.

2. What is the most common way to choose between possible word meanings when a word can mean more than one thing?

3. According to the last lesson, in John 6:53 where Jesus says whoever "eats my flesh and drinks my blood," He is referring to which of the following:
 - a. Actually eating His body and actually drinking His blood.
 - b. To the Lord's Supper in which we eat the bread and drink the cup.
 - c. Eating and drinking of His words, His teaching.

4. The word syntax may be defined as:
 - a. A tax on sin and we should all be in favor.
 - b. A study of the way language works, especially in word groups.
 - c. A study word definitions.
 - d. A study of figures of speech.

5. In 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks about the temple of God.
 - a. He says the Jewish temple will some day be rebuilt.
 - b. He says only that Christians as a group make up the temple.
 - c. He says only that individual Christians are a temple.
 - d. He speaks of the temple both in a group and an individual way.



**UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE
WORKSHEET NO. 6**

1. We can tell when to consider a word or expression as figurative when we recognize that, if taken literally, it would be an _____.
2. A Bible example of such an impossibility is:
3. Six categories of figures of speech common in the Bible are:
 - a. Metaphor—a _____ comparison of two _____ objects.
Examples:
 - b. Simile—a _____ comparison of two _____ objects.
Examples:
 - c. Parable—an _____ simile, usually based on some _____ event in life, to picture some _____ truth.
Examples:
 - d. Metonymy—a _____ of one word for another with which it has some _____.
Examples:
 - e. Hyperbole—an _____ to _____ not to deceive.
Examples:
 - f. Personification—giving _____ characteristics to something that is not _____.
Examples:

STUDY 1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-27. WRITE DOWN THE METAPHOR ON WHICH THIS SECTION IS BASED AND THEN WRITE DOWN ALL THE POINTS OF COMPARISON BETWEEN THE TWO ITEMS BEING COMPARED.

