
Interpreting the Bible

by: Ronald L. Dart

I had a friend some time ago who loved to argue the Bible, and whenever we got to a certain point, he would say "Well the Bible says what it means, and it means what it says."

Of course, he usually fell back on that statement when his point was weak, he didn't really believe it, not the way he intended it to be taken because he was kind of suggesting when it suited him, the Bible was to be taken literally and when it didn't suit him then it didn't necessarily have to be.

We Interpret as We Read

But in fact, we all interpret the Bible as we read it, and that is exactly what God intends for us to do.

Now I will admit it is not always that simple, but you are allowed to bring common sense to the table and ask yourself how Jesus intended us to take His meaning? I will give you an example.

I used to teach Bible in college, and I often enjoyed dropping a pop quiz on the students. One of my questions, which was related to the assignment that was to be read that particular day was, cite the Scripture from today's reading that shows Jesus did not always intend us to take Him literally.

You Cannot Always Take Jesus Literally

Now, how about it, you don't have the reading assignment they did, but if you have read the New Testament can you think of something Jesus said that should easily demonstrate that He doesn't always intend you to take Him literally. Well, here's the answer I was looking for from the class and you might be surprised how many of them missed it, even though they had just read it, theoretically, in the past few days.

It is Matthew five, verse 29. "If your right eye offends you, pluck it out, and cast it from you; for it is profitable for you that one of your members should perish, and not that your whole body should be cast into hell. If your right hand offends you, cut it off and cast it from you. It is profitable for you that one of your members should perish, and not that your whole body should be cast into hell."

Now unfortunately, I have heard of two separate instances where people tried to take that literally. One cut his hand off with a band saw. Can you believe it?

Now most sound minded people reading that passage will know immediately that if my right hand does something wrong, it was not at the volition of the hand. My hand does not have its

own brain. If you got caught shoplifting, there's no point in blaming your hand. Everybody knows that it was your brain that gave you the instructions and it is your head that should be cut off, but of course not.

If It's Absurd It's Figurative

And here is a useful lesson to take with you. Anytime a passage of Scripture seems to turn off into the absurd, it is figurative and not be taken literally, the absurdity illustrates it.

Now did Jesus say what He meant, and did He mean what He said?

Well, yes, but maybe He didn't say what you thought He said.

Let's read this passage again with our common sense engaged in this discussion.

I'll start in Matthew 5 verse 27, "You have heard that it was said by them of old time, you shall not commit adultery, but I say to you that whoever looks upon a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart, and if your right eye offend you, pluck it out and cast it from you, it is profitable for you that one of your members should perish, not that your whole body should be cast into hell." And then he goes on with the right hand, with the same issue.

What was Jesus Driving At?

Now instead of getting out the long knives to cut things off, ask yourself what was Jesus driving at? It's obvious to a thinking person. It's obvious to a commonsense person. Those things in your life that lead you to offend, cut them off, no matter how close to you they are. If you can't leave Internet pornography alone, sell your computer. Get it out your house. Don't let the stupid thing stay in there because you can't handle it. Read a book. I know that is a radical idea, but there's all kind of books at the public library and you don't even have to buy one. Wander by the library, check out a couple books, go home, put your feet up and read a good book and forget about your computer. And while you're at it, you may want to forget about the television too.

Any sound minded person would realize this right off in reading the Scripture, if he hadn't been sold a bill of goods on taking the Bible literally, all the time.

Clarity of Scripture

Now most Bible teachers hold to the clarity of Scripture. By that they mean the basic meaning and teaching of the Bible is clear enough to be understood by the average person. I think this is very important. Not that you'll understand every nuance of Scripture, but that the point, the meaning of the book is accessible to the ordinary man or woman. Otherwise what's the point, you'd end up with an intermediary between you, the ordinary man, and God. The Scripture is good enough to tell us that we need no intermediary other than Jesus. I understand that well enough. Do you?

Clarity of Scripture doesn't mean that you don't have to interpret it. It means you are able to interpret it yourself. In fact, chances are, you have long since made that interpretation about what Jesus said about cutting off your hand. Most people who read the Bible wouldn't do that.

Interpret Favorably

Now there is a danger that we might interpret a passage in the way most favorable to us. Well, I will shock you, this is a freedom that God grants to man, along with the freedom to suffer for stupidity. What Freedom? The freedom to interpret the passage in a way that is most favorable to you, even if it's wrong.

The man of God, who makes a good faith effort to take God's intent from the passage, will not go that far wrong.

Figures of Speech

The Bible is, among other things, literature, and there are various literary forms employed in the Bible, I would say more literary forms than in most books. Some of these have names that are even used in English literature. If you like to do web searches, you can find a list of some of these 'figures of speech', just look it up on your search engine. I found very quickly a list of the top 20 'figures of speech' used broadly in literature, not just in the Bible, but everywhere and explanations about what each of them were. It is kind of helpful to be able to hang labels on these things, and sometimes it clears up misunderstandings.

Hyperbole

Now the statement that I read by Jesus about 'cutting off your hand' is probably hyperbole. Hyperbole is an extravagant statement, the use of exaggerated terms for the purpose of emphasis or heightened effect.

In other words, Jesus brings this up to the point of shedding blood and causing pain to emphasize the issue of cutting off those things in your life that cause you to stumble and to offend.

Euphemisms

Another 'figure of speech' you will find frequently in the Bible when you're dealing with delicate matters is the euphemism. Let me give you an illustration, for example: In one of the long chases where 'King David to be' was hiding out from Saul, who was trying to chase him down. David hid in a cave and he was standing in there watching from the inside, when Saul and his army walked by. Now Samuel who wrote this story tells us that Saul spotted the cave and turned aside to go into the cave to 'cover his feet'. Now the first time I read that I thought, "Oh he's going in there to take a nap." Well no, it turns out that 'to cover the feet' is an idiom for 'to go to the toilet'. It is a euphemism. The whole passage gains a lot of power, when you realize this delicate little shade of meaning, and what actually happened and took place in that cave.

Things become a little easier when you realize that the biblical writers had all their little peculiarities of expression. I'm not going to bore you with a long list of them. You are smart enough to realize that when the writer is trying to tell you something indirectly or emphatically, and you will see quickly enough, that to take it literally is a mistake.

Parables, Allegories and Visions

Now, there is a broader category of techniques which I'm sure that you are already familiar with. It includes parables, allegories and visions and dreams, and you find these salted all through every book in the Bible. In Psalm 78, for example, which itself is a piece of music, this category is alluded to. The psalmist sings in Psalm 78, "Give ear, O my people, to my law, incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable. I will utter dark sayings of old which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us, we will not hide them from their children. We will show the generation to come, the praises of the Lord and his strength and his wonderful works that he has done."

Now parables are equivalent to dark sayings. This means that they are not to be taken literally. Parables are more like allegories than like an illustration. They are, in a way, extended riddles. When I speak, I use illustrations, to make the complex simpler. Allegories don't do that. For one thing allegories are capable of more than one interpretation

Listen to Jesus

Sit yourself on a stone and listen to Jesus as He teaches with a parable. Imagine that you have never heard this parable before. As you listen you know what Jesus' style is and it was common for the rabbis of the day that He is teaching with an allegory or parable, if you will.

Ask yourself the meaning of what Jesus is saying as he teaches?

He said in Matthew 13:3, "Behold, a sower went forth to sow, and when he sowed, some seeds fell by the wayside and the fowls came and devoured them up. Some fell on stony places where there wasn't a lot of dirt and they sprang up quickly because there was no deepness of earth, but when the sun came up, they were scorched, because they had no root, so they withered away. Some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprung up and choked them. Others fell into good ground that brought forth fruit, some hundredfold, some sixtyfold and some thirtyfold, who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Now I'm not sure, if we had never read this before, that we would all agree as to exactly what this means. Who is the sower? What's the seed? And what is the fruit that is being born? And how does this all work?

Why Did Jesus Speak in Parables?

The fact is Jesus' disciples were puzzled by this. They definitely though recognized that last sentence as a caution, 'who has ears to hear, let him hear'. That plainly told them that not everyone would have ears to hear, so they came to Him and said, "Why are you speaking to them in parables?"

Now Jesus' answer to this question flies in the face of what I learned in Sunday School. He answered and said to them, "I speak in parables, because it is given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given."

Now this is a little bit of a shock. It's no surprise that people gathered around Jesus to hear him teach. After all, he healed so many sick people and did miracles that they wanted to see what he would do. It is a surprise that He did not speak plainly to them when he got them around him. So,

Jesus divides his listeners into two categories, those who get it and those who don't. Now how does this work? In which category are you as a listener?

Jesus went on with his disciples and said in verse 12, "Whoever has, shall be given, and he shall have more abundance. Whoever has not, it shall be taken away from him, even what he has. So, I speak to them in parables, because they seeing, see not, hearing they hear not, neither do they understand."

Now this should not be totally strange to us. We have all experienced this when we are told something plainly and they heard something entirely different. You know how this works. You can be involved in a conversation, you could tell somebody something, and then a day or so later, they don't even realize you told it to them. Our mind set, our world view and what's going on right now profoundly influences how we understand what we see and what we hear and to some extent, whether we see it, or we hear it.

Jesus went on in verse 14, "In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah which says, by hearing you shall hear and shall not understand, and seeing you shall see and not perceive. For this people's heart is waxed fat and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed lest at any time they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them."

If you think about this for a while, you'll easily see how it can be so, that we get to the place where we are so content with life. Everything is working. We have plenty to eat. We're happy and enjoying life and frankly we don't want to hear anything that's going to rock our boat, and so God comes along, Jesus comes on the scene and speaks to us in parables, and the parable allows us to bring ourselves to it. It allows us to interpret things in the way we want to see them, and we are able to go on with our lives.

Adultery

Take a man who has committed adultery. He has a mistress. He has left his wife and family and he got caught at it. He comes back in self-justification mode. Well it is because of this and because of that. This event that he's just been through will color what he sees and hears and will influence his judgment, just like lying influences your judgment. When you tell somebody lie, it changes you. You may get away with it. They may believe you right to the core, but you are not the same. So consequently, you no longer hear things the way you used to hear them. You no longer see them the way you used to see them.

In other words, the unrepentant sinner is simply deaf and blind to certain things. Jesus went on to say in Matthew 13:16, "Blessed are your eyes for they see, blessed are your ears for they hear, for verily I say unto you, many prophets and righteous men have desired to see the things you see and have not seen them. To hear those things that you hear and have not heard them." Now I won't go on to read Jesus' explanation of the parable which he then gave to his disciples. You can read it for yourself in Matthew chapter 13.

Parables of Jesus are Fiction

I want to take you to another example, which is also clearly an allegory. I realize this is going to give heartburn to some of you, but the parables of Jesus are fiction. They are fiction, not in the sense of being lies, but in the classic definition of literary fiction, something invented by the imagination. It is an invented story.

In this allegory, the characters and scenes are described. One the characters is even given a name, but neither the characters nor the scene is intended to be taken as real or historic. They exist only in the story.

Lazarus and the Rich Man

Here's the allegory, as Jesus develops it in Luke 16:19, "There was a certain rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day." This guy's table must have been something to behold. "There was a beggar named Lazarus, who laid at his gate full of sores and desired to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, the dogs came and licked his sores."

Now here we are asked to visualize this incredible contrast between the lives of these two men and the obvious unfairness of it all. Now Jesus' listeners immediately knew that the rich man was in violation of a fundamental principle of Jewish law, and that is, that he should have been giving to this poor man, not the crumbs, but reasonably good food to the man. It came to pass that the beggar died and was carried by the angels into Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, he lifts up his eyes, being in torment, and seeing Abraham away off and Lazarus in his bosom."

Now wait a minute, is there any doctrine of heaven or hell, that puts these men in two places within vision and earshot of one another. I've never heard any such thing from such preachers. Heaven is way off up there and hell is way off down there somewhere, and never the two shall meet

But remember, this is fiction, it is not real. The setup is designed to convey one idea and to develop one point. It is an allegory, full of imagery and everything is in symbols.

"And the rich man cried and said, father Abraham, have mercy on me, send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in the water to cool my tongue. I am tormented in this flame." Now again, this is all imagery, it is all overstated. Dipping the tip of your finger in the water is not going to help you in the flames of hell.

Now this was not an unfamiliar idea to Jesus' listeners because some Jewish teachers taught this idea of hell, of a period of time of torment, not necessarily going on forever. One of the Jewish teachings on this was that hell lasts for one year and at the end of that time, something else happens.

Gehenna

Now the people that Jesus was talking to could also see the smoke of hell from where they stood as Jesus spoke. I don't know if you realize that, it was a place called Gehenna, where bodies were burned along with trash and other things that were burned. The priests, for example, would take

certain parts of the animals that was not burned on the altar and they burned them there. Gehenna is the Greek word for the Hebrew place referring to the valley south of Jerusalem called the Valley of the son of Hinnom.

Conventional Wisdom

So, Jesus takes conventional wisdom to make his point. Conventional wisdom is, you have two different guys, one goes to hell and one goes to be with Abraham, in this case, and there's a great gulf between them.

Abraham said, "Son, do you remember that in your lifetime you received good things, and Lazarus evil things. But now he is comforted, and you are tormented. And besides all this, between us there's a great gulf fixed so that those who pass from here to there, and you cannot pass. Neither can they pass to us that we come from there. So, we have this gulf between us," but they're hollering back and forth across it.

Now again, I know of no doctrine of heaven or hell that postulates this kind of an arrangement. This is a particular Jewish way of looking at this particular statement that Jesus made.

The Point of the Story

Now we come to the point of the story. The rich man says in Luke 16:27, "I pray you therefore father, that you would send Lazarus to my father's house. I've got five brothers there, that he may testify to them, lest they come also to this place of torment." Abraham said, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." And he said, "No, father Abraham, but if someone went to them from the dead, they would repent."

And what Abraham says in reply to this is the point of allegory. He said, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded that though one rose from the dead." So, what is the point of this allegory? That you go to hell when you die? No, not really. The point is, if you don't let God speak to you from the Scriptures, it wouldn't help to send somebody from the dead, from the grave, to talk to you.

The Scriptures are the word of God and a sufficient guide to life.

A Lesson in Interpretation

Now a lesson in interpretation. The picture that Jesus draws from these two men includes an absurdity. People in heaven are not going to be eating at tables within sight and sound of people being tormented in hell. How could heaven be a happy place, how could it be a place of joy, comfort and peace when you could see this happening to people across the gulf?

This doesn't even begin to address the absurdity of hell, as it is conventionally taught, of which Dante in his book 'The Inferno' tried to point out the absurdity of hell, and his was not intended to be an advocacy of it. He was just trying to show you that it didn't make sense.

When you encounter absurdity in the Bible, you are free to realize that it is symbolic. It is imagery. It is a parable. It is an allegory and you are expected to bring common sense to the table and ask yourself, "What is to be learned from this?" Now how important is this? Well it affects

your reading of the Bible, from Genesis all the way to Revelation, because 'figures of speech' are used from the beginning all the way to the end.

Why is that then? Well, one it is the conventional way that people wrote, and people were familiar with it, but also it leaves you the freedom to understand it or to dismiss it. And God is very big on freedom.

Ask yourself as you read, what does God want me to learn from this? What am I to understand? How shall I live? You are smart enough to find the answer, if you just don't close your eyes to see it!

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. Can you think of other scriptures that Jesus didn't intend people to take literally?
2. What deeper meaning do you think Jesus intended when He spoke figuratively in the scripture you thought of in the above question?
3. Do you agree that the Bible is written in such a way that every ordinary person can read it and understand the basic message?
4. Have you ever interpreted a passage to then later on have another insight that makes you interpret it differently?
5. Have you prayed for clarity in regards to the Scriptures, and God granted clarity to you?
6. Is it easy to twist scripture to justify our actions? In what way?
7. Do you know of other euphemisms in the Bible that actually shed more light on what is really going on in a scripture?
8. Do you think that our freedom to interpret the Bible is one way for "iron to sharpen iron?"
9. When you have a different interpretation of a passage from another brother/sister, how do you handle it?

10. Have you ever encountered anyone that has taken the Bible too figuratively or too literally?