

Figures of Speech

Hermeneutics Pt.5

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Contents

Definition	1
Examples	1
Purposes of figures	2
Interpreting figures.....	2
Discern the Purpose for Using the Figure	4
Overstatement	7

What books of the Bible have figurative language? (All) Almost no communication takes place without figurative language – it is an integral part of communication. To understand language, you must understand the strict, literal meaning of grammar. But that is not enough. You must also be able to interpret figures of speech.

One of the most common questions I get in hermeneutics is “How do you know when something is figurative?” That’s an excellent question, because a huge number of interpretive errors come from taking figurative language literally and literal language figuratively. As common a question as that is, few texts on hermeneutics have a section on it. The good news is, like just about everything else in hermeneutics, you already intuitively know how. The bad news is, you know it so well – it is so intuitive, that you may not be able to apply what you know to interpreting the Bible without re-learning it.

Definition

A figure of speech is any use of words other than the simplest, normal use. Another way of saying that is a figure of speech is a use of words that someone armed only with a dictionary and a basic grammar could “prove” to be an error. Figures of speech are used to achieve an effect beyond the range of simple mechanical language.

Examples

I randomly picked up a newspaper and copied the first two sentences in both the front page articles: “In Boston, the state police pulled over a batboy who had borrowed the car of a Red Sox shortstop and discover a vial containing anabolic steroids in the glove compartment. In San Diego, the Padres randomly test minor leaguers for steroids at spring training and find that about one in five test positive.” The first figure of speech is “the state police pulled over a batboy.” We know that’s a figure, because someone who only had a dictionary and a grammar book would say the statement doesn’t make sense. The term “state police” refers to a political organization that includes hundreds of employees. In reality, just one individual officer (or, at the most, two) pulled the batboy over – not the entire organization. That is a very common figure of speech called metonymy – where one word is replaced by a related word. In this case, the literal way to say this would be to say “A state policeman pulled over...” But the writer decided to use metonymy and replace the phrase “a state policeman” with “the state police.” The actual subject is removed, and the organization he is working on behalf of is put in its place. And we all know that’s a figure of speech, because it wouldn’t make sense if taken literally.

Where is the next figure of speech? (“Pulled over”) Do you suppose there was an actual, literal pulling taking place? No. That’s a figure of speech we use to refer to the process of a police officer indicating that you are to stop. “The Padres” is another use of metonymy, where the organization is put in place of some doctor they hire, who is acting on their behalf. “One in five” is another figure. It’s not that they only tested five. It’s just a way of describing 20% in a more vivid way.

Purposes of figures

There are always purposes for figures of speech. There is a reason we use figurative language – beyond just making speech interesting. A message or idea will affect you in a different way depending on how it is communicated, even though the meaning is identical. For example, if you want to emphasize how few are on drugs, you might say, “It’s only 20%.” But if you want to make it sound like a lot, you say, “1 in 5” so people will picture little groups of five, and one in every group takes drugs.

Sometimes people will ask you if you take the Bible literally. But if you understand anything about language, you realize it’s a silly question. The answer is, “I interpret the Bible the same way I interpret the things you tell me. I show you enough respect so that those things that are intended to be taken literally I take literally, and figures of speech I take figuratively.”

Interpreting figures

If you are interpreting the Bible, and you decide something is figurative and not literal, you must be able to demonstrate why a literal reading wouldn’t have made sense to the original readers. You can just use the word “figurative” as a trump card to get you out of a jam whenever you hit a passage that you don’t feel comfortable with.

For example, if you have been taught all your life that
the sun and stars existed before the earth,
the sun is much older than the moon,
land was first, then oceans,
the first light on earth from the sun,
the sun existed before land plants on earth,
dinosaurs were extinct before man existed,
reptiles appeared before birds,
land mammals appeared before marine mammals,
death existed before Adam and before sin, and
God created through the indirect process of allowing natural laws to operate.

We know about the nature of the creation process, because we observe it today through science. And then you read Genesis and it says the opposite of each one of those, so you can’t just say, “Well, the whole thing is a giant figure of speech.” It may be a figure of speech. But if you are going to assert that, you have to demonstrate why it wouldn’t have been interpreted literally by the original readers. There are thousands of figures throughout Scripture. For example, just consider one, single verse:

Matthew 23:37 "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing."

Bullinger points out four figures of speech in that one verse.¹ **Jerusalem** is repeated, and it means the same thing both times. It’s used to communicate the emotional effect. Jesus refers to the unbelievers in Jerusalem, but in place of all that it just says, “Jerusalem.” So the city is put in place of those individuals.

Jesus’ gathering is compared to that of a hen. By my definition, that’s not really a figure of speech. It would be a figure if it said, “I have longed to gather your children under my wing.” That is a figure that is often used in the Psalms – where human or animal characteristics are applied to God. The question is rhetorical. Jesus is not trying to gather information, so the question mark isn’t literal. He’s not expecting someone from Jerusalem to pipe up and say, “286 times!”

¹ P.1070 Figures of Speech Used in the Bible, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI 1992.

There are others Bullinger doesn't mention. Jerusalem is put in place of certain ancient Jews who killed prophets. **Your children** is a figurative way of describing all people born in Jerusalem. Figures of speech are used to achieve an effect beyond the range of simple mechanical language. It is used for emphasis or to draw a comparison.

There are two ways: You could memorize all the 200+ different figures of speech in Bullinger, and how they are used, or you could just ask yourself this question: "What is being compared to what, and in what way are they analogous?"

Example:

John.10:7-10 Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

Most people intuitively know that when Jesus says, "**I am the gate**" He is speaking figuratively, not literally. But how do we interpret that figure? Is it just up for grabs – whatever comparison you want to make is OK? Jesus is like a gate. Gates depend upon a fence to support them; therefore Jesus is dependent upon the Father? Or – gates are the centerpiece of the fence, so Jesus is the centerpiece of all things? Or should we take the approach of others who say since it's a figure of speech, we can't know for sure what Jesus was getting at? No. Figures of speech are meant to be understood just as much as literal language. In fact, the point is to make an idea more vivid and clear.

So let's interpret the figure: First, what is being compared? – Jesus and a gate. So Jesus is saying He resembles a gate in some way. So the next question is, in what way are they analogous – in what way does Jesus resemble a gate? What aspect is being compared? Not every aspect. Not the appearance, texture, weight, cost, material – only the *function*. Jesus is like a gate only in the sense that he functions like a gate (keeping some out and letting others in. The gate is the only point of entry).

Now let's try verse 8 – **All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers....** Were all the supposed messiahs who came before Jesus literally burglars? Kleptomaniacs? No. We reject that literal interpretation, because it wouldn't fit the context. So it's figurative. So, what is being compared? – False messiahs and robbers. What aspect is being compared – in what way are they analogous?

In the context, the picture is of robbers who steal sheep from the shepherd. False messiahs are similar to burglars in that they steal – they wrongly take away that which is precious. Just as thieves wrongly take away your valuables, so false messiahs wrongly take people from God.

This can be an incredibly enriching process. Interpreting figures of speech is easier than you might have thought, and it is incredibly fruitful (because it unlocks ideas and meanings that you may have never seen before if you just skim over the surface of Scripture). This is something that will yield much fruit even in a short time with not very much effort. Now be careful – the interpretation of the figure must be what the author originally intended. Otherwise it's eisogesis.

Let's try...

Psalm 40:2 He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.

What part is figurative? (**Slimy pit, mud and mire, and rock**) What is being compared? What is it exactly that is like a slimy pit? (The writer's difficult circumstances) In what way are they analogous? (In a mud pit, everything is difficult, depressing and scary.) What about the rock? Did God physically lift him up onto a stone? No. It's another figure. His new circumstances resemble a rock in what way? (After having been in a slimy pit it's nice to be up high on firm ground. His present circumstances are similar to being on a rock in that he is now in a place of safety and security. And the best thing about being on a

rock after having been in a slimy, muddy pit is the fact that there is no slime or mud. The unpleasant circumstances are gone.)

So the correct interpretation of Psalm 40:2 is that the psalmist's circumstances were so difficult, depressing and scary that it was like being in a slimy pit, but God put him in a position of security, encouragement and relative ease.

Deuteronomy 32:4 He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.

What is compared? (God is compared to a rock.) In what way are they similar? (They are both strong and stable.)

Discern the Purpose for Using the Figure

When a speaker or writer decides to use a figure of speech, there is a reason he doesn't just say the same thing in literal terms. Using figurative language has a different effect.

When I go golfing, there is one figure of speech that those I'm golfing with tend to use to describe my game more than any other figure of speech. It usually comes around the 13th or 14th hole. That figure is: "The wheels are coming off the wagon." Aside from the fact I'm usually not in the greatest mood when that phrase is being utilized to describe my game, I've always liked that figure of speech – it's so descriptive. This image is of someone riding in a covered wagon, and making repairs as he rides. But the wagon is developing problems faster than he can fix them, and the problems are more serious than what he can handle, and still he is scrambling, trying to keep the thing together –and finally the wheels come off. He went from riding in a wagon to just sitting in a pile of wood. That picture communicates so much – the increasing level of the problem, and utter futility of the effort to keep going. It's possible for my golfing partners to say the exact same thing in a literal way. They could say, "Darrell, your golfing is getting so bad so fast that your score can't be salvaged and what you are doing right now isn't really golfing." But using the figure communicates the same thing in such a vivid way. God designed us to think in terms of comparisons, and so all communication uses figurative speech – comparing one thing to some analogous thing. If you want to tell someone that he has an encouraging effect because he does and says good things in a unique manner different than what normally takes place (and what normally takes place is a bit of a drudgery).

You can explain all that in literal terms, or you can just say, "You are a breath of fresh air." You can see the different effect that has. So once you figure out the meaning, go back to the figure, and ask why that was used. What did it add?

Luke 9:44 "Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men."

Think for a moment of how you would interpret that verse. Now compare your thoughts about that verse to your reaction when I read it with the figure of speech Jesus used: Literally, "Let it sink down into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men." The first time I read the verse, you probably barely noticed the "**listen carefully**" (if at all). But imagine if you were there, and Jesus looked into your face and said, "I'm about to say something. Let this sink down into your ears." So when you study that verse, after noticing and interpreting the figure of speech, you ask, "What is the purpose for using that figure?" In this case, it would be to make the following statement more emphatic.

Conveying emotion is an important part of communication. Which is more accurate: If I say to my wife, "The first time you kissed me stars were exploding in the sky and it took my breath away." or "The first time you kissed me it felt kind of like putting my lips on some warmed up raw liver"? Technically the second one might be more accurate, but when you take into consideration the full scope of what I want to communicate the first one would be much more accurate than the second.

So let's practice:

1 Corinthians 6:18-20 Flee from sexual immorality. (command)

All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. (statement that serves as the reason for the command – avoid sexual sin, because sexual sin is unique)

19 Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? (rhetorical question explaining the previous statement)

How does that explain the previous statement? Start by interpreting the figure in verse 19. What is it? **“Your body is a temple”** The body is compared to a temple. In what way are they analogous? The Temple is the sacred, holy dwelling place of God, and for that reason must never be contaminated or defiled. So how does that make Paul’s point? Just as you would never think of bringing some defiling thing right into the Holy of holies, so you should never consider bringing the defilement of sexual sin right into your body. What is the principle of the whole passage? Be especially careful about avoiding sexual sin, because that kind of sin violates God’s holiness in a unique way – different than any other kind of sin. If that is the principle, is this a valid application: “Don’t smoke cigarettes because your body is a temple”? No. The issue is that since your body is a temple, you must avoid spiritual contamination, not harm. Harming your body is a different issue that is not addressed in this passage.

Psalm 110 The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." 2 The LORD will extend your mighty scepter from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies. 3 Your troops will be willing on your day of battle. Arrayed in holy majesty, from the womb of the dawn you will receive the dew of your youth. 4 The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek." 5 The Lord is at your right hand; he will crush kings on the day of his wrath. 6 He will judge the nations, heaping up the dead and crushing the rulers of the whole earth. 7 He will drink from a brook beside the way; therefore he will lift up his head.

God the Father says to the Messiah **Sit at my right hand** (v.1). Then in verse 5 He says **The Lord is at your right hand**. If we take that literally, it’s an impossibility. If the Messiah is on the Father’s right, then the Father would be on the Messiah’s left. They can’t both literally be at each other’s right hand. So how do we interpret the figure? In verse 1 what is being compared? The Messiah’s being given a place of privilege and exaltation at the favored side of the Father is compared to someone being seated at a King’s right hand. In what way are they similar? In both cases, the opponents of that person are in real trouble.

In verse 5 what is compared? The Father’s promise to help the Messiah is compared to someone being placed at the Messiah’s right hand as a helper. In what way are they similar? Just as a “right hand man” might assist and help a warrior in a battle, so the Father will help the Messiah against His foes. So the statements that say opposite things if taken literally are actually saying exactly the same thing when the figures are interpreted: the Father will destroy the enemies of the Messiah.

Genesis 6:5-8 The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. 6 The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. 7 So the LORD said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth--men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air--for I am grieved that I have made them." 8 But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.

If taken literally, this passage would seem to contradict those passages that indicate that God knows everything that will happen. It sounds like man’s sin took God by surprise, and He now regards

His work of creation as a mistake. Since this is written by someone who fully believed the creation to be a good act, and who believed in the sovereignty, perfection and omniscience of God, and he was writing to an audience that also fully believed those things, we know it is a figure. What is being compared? God's emotions with those emotions a human being experiences when he has made a big mistake. In what sense are they similar? God wants us to think about His emotions as being like our emotions are when we experience regret. They are similar in the sense that the results of His past actions are causing great pain.

Revelation 14:9-10 A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, 10 he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath.

Since we know that God's wrath is not physically composed of literal fermented grape juice, we understand that this is a figure. What is being compared? Wrath to unmixed wine. In what way are they similar? It's similar to something you drink in that there is nothing you can do about it. If you are forced to drink something harmful, once it's in you there is nothing you can do about it. It will have its effect. And it's similar to unmixed wine in that it has a maddening effect (v.8).

Psalm 63:1 O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

What are the figures? (Soul thirsting, body longing and the land being dry and weary, no water).

Figure #1 (soul thirsting)

What is being compared in the first one? Soul longing for God with the mouth thirsting. In what way are they similar? When I have literal thirst I experience discomfort because of the lack of the water I need, and that discomfort focuses attention acutely on what is lacking. (If you lack vitamin B12, you might experience discomfort, but that doesn't make you crave a B12 supplement. But if you lack water, this kind of discomfort focuses all your thoughts on water). In the same way, the psalmist's soul experiences discomfort, and he is acutely aware that what is lacking is relational closeness with God. In the past I've criticized the song "More Love, More Power" because it calls for more of God in my life, which on its face seems in conflict with the fact that if you have God you have all of God. But in light of this Psalm, maybe that song isn't so far off. The psalmist recognized that even though he was a believer, there was an intimacy and closeness with God that he lacked and strongly desired.

Figure #2 (body longing)

What is being compared? The same distress discussed in the last figure is compared to physical weakness or infirmity. In what way are they similar? The lack of that closeness causes weakness in life that is similar to the kind of weakness you experience when your body is not working right.

Figure #3 (dry land)

What is being compared? The psalmist's surroundings with a desert. In what way are they similar? In the same way that a desert has no resources for nourishment, refreshment or satisfaction for the body, so the psalmist's surroundings had no resources for nourishment, refreshment or satisfaction for his soul.

Figure #4 (weary land)

What is being compared? The psalmist's surroundings with land that produces weariness. A dry, hot, oppressive environment causes weariness to the body. In the same way the psalmist's surroundings caused his soul to be weary and weak.

Figure #5 (no water)

What is compared? The psalmist's surroundings with a place that lacks water. In what way are they similar? Just as a place without water has nothing to offer the thirsty man, the psalmist's surroundings had nothing to offer to solve all the weariness and discomfort of his soul.

Matthew 5:38-39 “You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' 39 But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

Is there a figure? If so, how do you know? The reason I think there is a figure is because I find it unlikely that Jesus was intending to address such a rare circumstance as a slap on the right cheek. How many of you have been slapped on the right cheek in the past month? Year? Decade? I don't think I've ever been slapped on either cheek. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is teaching us the way we teach our children – teaching principles through graphic, picturesque illustrations. So what is being compared? A slap on the right cheek with any insult. In what way are they similar? Both are humiliating and normally produce anger and retaliation.

Romans 13:3-4 Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. 4 For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing.

Where is the figure? (The sword) What is being compared? The sword with the authority to use lethal force. In what way are they similar? Both cause death. What is the purpose of the figure? It makes the fact that God has given the authority to kill very graphic.

Overstatement

One other kind of speech that is not strictly literal is hyperbole – or overstatement. Many errors in interpreting the Bible come from people who refuse to believe there is such a thing as overstatement in the Bible, and so they take overstatements literally. Those people would say that any overstatement would be an example of dishonesty. When their kids exaggerate, they discipline them for lying. And so they figure there is no way there could be any exaggeration in the Bible.

Proverbs 26:18 Like a madman shooting firebrands or deadly arrows 19 is a man who deceives his neighbor and says, "I was only joking!"

Does that verse forbid all joking? No – it only forbids deceiving and then calling it joking. What's the difference? When only the speaker could know that the words are not meant to be taken literally, that's deception. But when it is clear to both the speaker and the listener, then it is a legitimate use of language for the purpose of emphasis or emotional impact. Suppose I go fishing on a hot day and catch a 12 inch fish, and I tell you, “It was a million degrees where I was, but at least I caught a nice, 18 ½ inch trout.” There are two exaggerations in that statement. One is legitimate and the other is deceptive. You would have no way of knowing that 18 ½ did not really mean 18 ½ inches. But it's obvious that I'm not actually claiming that it was literally a million degrees.

Does the Bible do that? Yes.

Matthew 24:1 Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. 2 "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

Herod's Temple was an absolutely awesome structure – unparalleled in the entire world. It could have easily qualified as one of the Seven Wonders of the World (but those were determined before it was ever built). The Romans completely destroyed it in 70 AD. The devastation was amazing. They broke

down the walls and threw the rubble into a valley that was next to the Temple. To this day that valley is no longer a valley – they completely filled it in. The devastation was so extreme it couldn't have been imagined at the time Jesus was speaking.

However – there actually were some stones left on top of each other down at the base. In fact, you can travel there today and see them – still on top of each other. Would anyone have come by after the devastation in 70 AD and seen all that wreckage and rubble and said, “Jesus was wrong”? No, they would say, “Wow – He was right!”

If I told you, “We aren't going to have this class next Thursday because this building is going to be a pile of rubble. Not one brick will be connected to another.” You would be shocked. And you would probably doubt me. But if you showed up next week and saw a pile of rubble, you wouldn't start sifting through it to see if you could find a couple of bricks still attached to each other to find out if I was right. You would understand the figure of speech – even if there were hundreds of bricks still attached to each other.

The purpose of the figure is to pack an emotional wallop. And it worked. Jesus had their attention.

God promised Abraham that his offspring would be as numerous as the sand on the seashore and the stars in the sky. Obviously that's not literal, because there aren't the same number of stars and grains of sand. In Abraham's time they thought there were far more grains of sand.² Today we know that there are far more stars than grains of sand. But either way, at least one of them is obviously has to be an overstatement.

Experts have estimated that 110 billion people have lived on earth from the beginning until now. Only a tiny fraction of those 110 billion were Jews. But suppose every last one of them were Jews, and suppose the estimate is way off. Suppose there were 220 billion, and every one of them was a Jew. Still, that wouldn't even be as many stars as are in the Milky Way alone – just one single galaxy. God could have given Abraham the exact number, but instead He used a figure of speech that had an emotional impact.

John 21:25 Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.

Obviously that's overstatement. If you wrote a 10-volume work on every second of Jesus' entire life – from conception to ascension, that would only be about 45 books per square mile on the earth.

One particular kind of overstatement is instances where a statement that has exceptions is made but the exceptions are not mentioned. If I tell one of my kids, “I'm taking you out to eat and we can go wherever you want to go and you can order anything you want” they know there are some limits. If they find some ridiculous restaurant and order everything on the menu, they know I would say no to spending \$3000 for a lunch. That's understood by them, and so it doesn't need to be mentioned. And if it were mentioned it would spoil the emotional impact. If I said, “I'll take you anywhere except...” and then listed off 25 places, that wouldn't be as exciting to them as if I just say, “We can go wherever you want” and leave the exceptions unstated.

We see that often in the Bible. At one time Jesus says, “If anyone divorces his wife he commits adultery.” And in another place He says, “If anyone divorces his wife except for immorality he commits adultery.” Both statements are true; He just didn't mention the exception in the first one. And later in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul gives another exception, and Jesus didn't mention that one in either statement.

Luke 6:30 Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.

² They used to think that there were 1012 stars. Ptolemy came along and said, “You're wrong, there are 1028.” Now we know there are 2000 visible at a time, a different 2000 that are visible 6 months later. So 4000 from each hemisphere – Eight thousand total that are visible with the naked eye. If you took the stars in we know of and put them in piles of a million, the Milky Way would have about 100,000 piles, and the known universe has a million times that many, and who knows what's beyond that.

Give whatever anyone ever asks for? Are there exceptions? If one of your kids came to you one day and said, "Hey, Dad, Luke 6:30 is my life verse. Give me the car," do you have to give it to him? What if a beggar asked you for more money than you have? Would you be disobeying Luke 6:30 if he asked for a million dollars and you didn't have a million dollars to give him? Obviously there are exceptions. Jesus was using overstatement to make a strong point. Whenever possible, and within the bounds of wisdom, don't hesitate to give. That's what Jesus was saying, but He didn't want the distraction of listing all the exceptions and caveats, so He didn't.

It's not always easy to discern when something is an intentional overstatement because you may have been taught that that statement was intended in an absolute sense all your life, so you can't use the common sense you have that enables you to discern overstatement. But one thing that can help is to look around in the context and find similar statements that are easier to discern. For example, Jesus taught us to keep three things private in Matthew 6. One of them is giving.

Matthew 6:3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret.

Because of that verse giving is the most top secret act of righteousness in the church. People will talk about their sex life more than their giving. Is that what Jesus wanted – no one ever knowing anything about anyone's giving?

The second thing in the list of things we are to keep private is prayer.

Matthew 6:6 But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Exact same context. Both statements are an explanation of verse 1 in the chapter.

Matthew 6:1 "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

Same context, one command to keep giving secret and another to keep prayer secret. And yet every church has public prayer every Sunday. We pray right in front of people right out in public in our small groups, at restaurants before we eat, etc. Why don't we keep our prayer life top secret? Because in general the Church has understood Matthew 6:6 in the context in which it was given. We understand that Jesus was not forbidding public prayer; He was just saying that you shouldn't do it for the purpose of human applause. You shouldn't do it for the purpose of impressing people. The main issue in Matthew 6 is reward. Just highlight the word "reward" every time it appears in Matthew 6 and it will make the meaning of that chapter crystal clear to you. You shouldn't pray in public in order to get the reward of people being impressed with your spirituality. That's all Jesus is saying when He says, "When you pray, go into your room and close the door." He didn't mean we are never to pray outdoors or that all our prayers are to be top secret. (Obviously, because we have records of Jesus praying outdoors where others could hear.)

We are able to use that common sense when we interpret the verses about prayer, but we struggle to apply that same common sense in the verses about giving or fasting because of church tradition. (And in some cases it may be because people want to hide their giving to avoid shame – which is for sure not what Jesus was talking about.)

I think it's a bad thing that everyone's giving is so private. When it is done with the right heart it is an act of righteousness. It is godliness. It is a spiritual gift. We are to follow the example of godly men and women so we can grow spiritually. But how can we do that in the area of giving? If I want to grow in that area, and make progress, I can't look to the example of the people who really excel in that area, because it's so top secret and hidden that I can't see it. Jesus told us not to do our acts of righteousness before men to be seen by them for the purpose of getting reward from them, but in the same sermon Jesus

also said, “Let your light shine before men so they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Mt.5:16). If you love giving, and you give with a joyful heart, and you excel in this area, and you have no desire to receive praise from men over it – I think you should let that be seen.

So if you need help knowing if a statement is intended in an absolute way, sometimes it helps to look at nearby statements. Just make sure you NEVER turn an absolute statement into a statement that has exceptions just because you want there to be exceptions. It has to be justified by something in the text.

HOMEWORK:

Interpret Hebrews 12:1

* Label the phrases

* Interpret any figures