

IDENTIFYING AND UNDERSTANDING BIBLE WORD PICTURES

Track 2 – Tools to Help Us Arrive at the Meaning of Word Pictures

Introduction

In the first lesson, we saw that a text should “stick together” (be *cohesive*) based on the grammar. It should also make sense *contextually*, or *cohere*, based on the ideas being presented. If we aren’t paying attention to the *context* in those ways, we can be easily misled and/or have no real idea what the author meant. If we’re paying attention, however, we will often see word pictures woven into the fabric of what we are reading, and those pictures are meant to help us understand what God is telling us. James, for instance, uses more figures of speech, analogies and imagery from nature (per chapter) than any other New Testament book or letter. Here are just a few examples:

- 1:6 – Waves of the sea
- 1:10 – Flower of the grass
- 3:2-3 – A bit in the horse’s mouth
- 3:5-6 – A small fire in a forest
- 3:4 – The rudder on a ship
- 3:4 – The force of the wind
- 3:11 – A spring of water
- 3:12, 17-18 – Cultivating crops
- 5:7, 17-18 – Rain from heaven¹

While we can “see” all of these pictures in our head, James is using them to point us to the meaning. In each case, the imagery is given to us to help us understand the idea that is communicated, often “between the lines”.

The word pictures that are “seen” in our heads can be communicated in a variety of ways. In this lesson, we will look at some of the ways pictures are formed in our heads and how those pictures will help us move toward the meaning and correct interpretation.

Tools and Terms Used in Linguistics That Will Help Us²

While you don’t need to know or remember the technical terms involved, I will mention them just for the purpose of explaining how they will help us as we start to look at word pictures in the Bible. Most of the time, the pictures or images are given to us to help us connect a concept to something we are far more familiar with.³ While I’ll be giving you just a “small slice” of the helpful tools that are out there, I hope you will agree that these are some of the most helpful!

Salient Features – While words and ideas are often given to help us form pictures that will move us toward and clarify the meaning, those words and ideas are rarely intended to communicate *everything* about the pictures. Those words and ideas are usually intended to highlight some particular aspect or “feature”; if we’re talking about the Bible,

¹ Bulleted List adapted from Blue, J. Ronald. *James. The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck. Vol. 2. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985. 817.

² Most of the ideas here have been adapted from my introductory notes on the Epistle of James.

³ The general term for this is “Figures of Speech”, with the idea that our speech/words often create “figures”.

it is sometimes (often?) difficult to figure out what aspect or aspects of the image are highlighted without enough *context*...

In order to illustrate the idea, let me use an idea that I grew up with and then had to “adjust” as I was exposed to other cultures. When I was a young driver, I had a couple of cars that people would refer to as “lemons”. As I got older, states began to pass “lemon laws” in order to protect car buyers. So, what’s the relationship between a car and a lemon? Don’t we use lemons to make lemonade, which most people love? And don’t we see lemon wedges on water glasses for people to flavor the water in a way that they *like*? If *lemons* are generally looked upon favorably, why was I taught to see them as a way to talk about bad/problematic cars?

I never really thought about the issue created by “cars as *lemons*” until I went to Brazil. In Brazil, if you want to tell someone that you think a car creates problems and that you should avoid it, you will say that it’s a *pineapple*...huh? I love pineapples, especially Brazilian pineapples (they taste better, in my opinion), so what does a bad car have in common with a pineapple?

This is one of the places where the idea of *salient features* becomes helpful. While both lemons and pineapples have good things that can be said about them, in both cases the *features* that are being highlighted are *the bad ones*. When comparing a car to a lemon, the *feature* of a lemon that is being highlighted is its *sourness* (and the face that you make when you bite on it!). When comparing a car to a pineapple in Brazilian culture, the feature that is being highlighted is its prickly exterior, which will hurt your hands if it isn’t carefully handled.

There are many words in the Bible that have a variety of salient features, and there are times when people trained in theology will choose the features that fit their theology⁴... The only way to avoid that is by knowing that we should find the features that fit the *context* (as if I haven’t used the word *context* enough). A case in point would be the word “fruits”, which has at least six different meanings as it is used in the Bible. Most readers, because of the theological ideas they’ve been taught, assume that it can only mean one thing, which is simply not the case! All of the different *meanings* of “fruits” have a *feature* in common, the idea that *something is being produced*. The *meaning* in a certain passage of the Bible, however, should be determined by its *context*. We’ll come back to “fruits” later in this study, by the way...

Frames – Language can communicate on several levels. When words and phrases are used in a story or passage that, when put together, form a word picture, that word picture is called a “frame.” Frames are often missed, if we’re not looking for them, because our mind *naturally* “sees” them. Frames help communicate the writer’s meaning because the picture gives another level of information about the subject being discussed.

As an example, imagine for a moment that I wanted to talk to you about the importance of individual team members to a team if the team wants to *move forward*. If I give you the terms “steering wheel” and “speedometer” in the story, you might “see” the interior front of a car, right? If I add “tires”, “bumpers” and “engine” to the story, however, you would know that I had a whole car in mind. At that point, it’s pretty easy to see how each part of the car that I mentioned would fit with my goal (intended meaning) of how

⁴ As a case in point, consider all the varying ideas surrounding the word “dead” in the Bible.

important the “members” are if the team hopes to *move forward*. In fact, your mind has probably already pieced some of those ideas together! And we use those frames every day in conversation so often that we don’t realize we’re using pictures to communicate.⁵

In the New Testament, consider Galatians 3:22-23 as an example:

*But the Scripture has **confined** all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were **kept under guard** by the law, **kept** for the faith which would afterward be revealed.” (NKJV)*

Here Paul is speaking about the Jews’ relationship to the Mosaic Law, and in two verses uses the expressions “confined,” “locked up,” and “under guard” (my translation from the Greek). The picture he is trying to communicate is that of *the Law as a jailor*. He uses the expressions to communicate that picture to his readers. While a jailor might be a very good person, you still don’t want to be his prisoner!

Images such as “bride” and “body”, when used of the Jesus’ church, are full of meaning as we think about what is true of a *bride* and a *body* (attached to a Head!). And there are many more frames that we will encounter as we *use* this language tool in our study.

Scripts – A script is like the “movie version” of a frame. When words and ideas about one event/activity are used to explain an unrelated event or activity, the “movie” created by that string of ideas is called a “script.” If you read the last lesson, you may remember *Into the West*, a song about a couple of people who have been on a journey that is coming to an end as one of them waits for a ship to take them over to the “other shore”. The *script*, which includes coming to the seashore, waiting for the ships and the seagulls calling, is meant to communicate the meaning of the song: coming to the end of life and dying.

Let me give you another *script* that I’ve heard used in normal conversation. The people in the conversation were talking about *life and how it’s constantly changing*, requiring us to adjust our responses and pay attention to what is happening around us. They said things like this: “I really had to put my foot on the brakes that time.” “I had to weave around that situation.” “It seems like every day goes by faster.” “I had to race to make that happen.”

In each case, the *script* that they are using to communicate is *driving a car*. But they’re not talking about driving a car! They are *using* the script in order to talk about *what happens in life* as we “go through” it. And while we naturally do this all the time, we rarely stop to think about the relationship between the script and the meaning. In the Bible, I hope you will discover that *seeing the scripts* will help you “see” what the author is trying to communicate, their *meaning*.

I actually used a script at the beginning of this study when I wrote, “we will often see word pictures *woven into the fabric* of what we are reading.” While I used words to create an image of the *process of fabric weaving*, I was actually trying to communicate the idea of the blending of word pictures with the author’s text and meaning. And while I didn’t do that on purpose when I wrote it, it was the easiest way to *show* what I meant.

⁵ For further reading on this, you can see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*.

The Bible is FULL of scripts, both in the Old Testament⁶ and in the New. For our purposes, we will be focusing on the New Testament. Parables, for example, are usually scripts, given for the purpose of communicating deeper truths. And when those parables are in a series, we should be able to look at the images we are given and fit them together in such a way that they make sense *together*. Otherwise, there is a *disconnect*, and our minds have to do some serious gymnastics; how's that for an image? Theology, unfortunately, will often disregard or fail to see the script in order to maintain their point of view. This often happens when people look at a part of the script but ignore the rest of it; in other words, they pull it out of *context*. More about that later.

For the moment, what would a *script* in the New Testament look like? As an illustration, take a look at Hebrews 12:1-2:

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (NKJV)

Here the author is speaking about *the Christian life*, but the *activity* he uses to explain it is an Olympic marathon: the stadium, the preparation to run, the endurance necessary during the race, the finish line, etc. He communicates a LOT about our lives as Christians by using the *script* of a marathon in a stadium! We will soon see how important some scripts are to Bible interpretation. If you think about the *processes* involved in *war*, *marriage*, *weddings* and the *tending of vineyards* as just a very few examples, you can imagine how understanding the processes might help us interpret passages in the Bible.

Participant Reference – While I wish I could give you an easier term, this is a tool from linguistics that I think you will find incredibly helpful once you start to use it. “Participant reference” is the term I learned, but it is also called “character tracking” or “participant tracking”. Simply put, it involves tracking the use of *pronouns* through a particular text. I gave an example of this in the last lesson:

“When I was walking down the street the other day, I saw one of my friends walking toward me. There was a really large dog nearby. As my friend walked toward me, so did the dog. Right when I went to shake my friend’s hand, he bit me!”

This example only has one spot that might be unclear, the last pronoun “he”. But if you are following the story and “seeing” what’s happening in your mind, you would naturally conclude that “he” is *the dog* in the story. But haven’t you had those conversations where the story involves several people and you end up asking, “Which person are you talking about *now*?” If there are lots of “he” and “she” peppered throughout the conversation, it’s easy to get lost! While the speaker may be “seeing” which person they are referring to, it’s not always so easy for the hearer to “see”!

I can think of no better example of the failure to use this tool than when people quote the Bible phrase, “You will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:16). The word “them,” after centuries of interpretive tradition, is consistently taught to mean “everybody

⁶ In the Old Testament, take Psalm 23 as a great example of a *script*: a Shepherd taking care of His sheep in different situations.

everywhere". But how would we know who "they" are without a context? Let's take a look at Matthew 7:

*15 "Beware of false prophets, **who** come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly **they** are ravenous wolves. 16 You will know **them** by **their** fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? 17 Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Therefore by **their** fruits you will know **them**. 21 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. 22 **Many** will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' 23 And then I will declare to **them**, 'I never knew **you**; depart from Me, **you** who practice lawlessness!'"*

In the context, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that "they" are "false prophets". If the verse is taken in isolation, to be honest, "they" could be just about anybody. But here "they" are well-defined, not just by tracking the pronouns, but by considering the *images* that Jesus gives concerning "them". For the moment, it should be easy to see that Jesus is not making a generalization, in contrast to centuries of interpretation that would tell you He was. Let me restate Matthew 7:15-16 by replacing the pronouns with what they point to: Beware of false prophets. False prophets come to you in sheep's clothing. Inwardly false prophets are ravenous wolves. You will know false prophets by their fruits. Fair enough?

We will be *tracking the characters* in several of our studies where it is really helpful, so if you want some practice as we move forward, listen to the use of "he", "she" and "they" the next time someone tells you a story...

Paradigms – The term "paradigm" as we will use it for the purposes of our study is *the set of ideas, concepts and beliefs that we use as a filter through which to interpret what we see, hear and read*. Everyone tries to make sense of the world around them, and over time we all put together sets of ideas that seem to fit what we see. Humans all have a paradigm that they work from, and it may be more or less consistent, depending on how much they've thought about it. While our own paradigm may have very personal elements, most people share many parts of a particular paradigm with others who share that "filter."

Unfortunately, the downside of this occurs when people view the world (or God) a certain way and come to agree with a group of others who share the same "filter": they create boundaries concerning what they will hear or not hear.⁷ This happens because they want to believe that their paradigm is the *correct* way to view the world, and any evidence to the contrary would upset their view of the world! Churches often operate in the same way. They teach their interpretations of Scripture and then equate their interpretation with "the truth." As a consequence, it is very, very difficult to get them (us?) to hear any other view than what they've been taught.

⁷ If you're interested in reading more about paradigms, let me suggest Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. He argues that the scientific community has "changed its mind" many times in the face of enough new information, and then becomes dogmatic that their view is "the truth" (or at least until the next time they change their mind). He gives many historical examples of how this cycle takes place.

It is so important that we come to the place where we separate between *what the Bible says* and *how we interpret it*. It will be helpful to identify our own paradigm (as a set of ideas or beliefs/assumptions) and then see if it lines up with what God has revealed in His Word. Doing so will keep us humble as we continue to ask the Holy Spirit to guide our thinking and help us understand, but *it is difficult*. Jesus' audience was working from a particular religious and cultural paradigm, and they had the Old Testament prophets; look how difficult it was for them to "hear" Jesus, simply because they confused their paradigm with the truth of Scripture!

Knowing that we all work from a paradigm should help us *not only* be more committed students of the Word, it should also help us recognize our dependence upon the Holy Spirit as we learn.

A Little Practice

In order to practice using the tools we've been talking about, let me go back one more time to Matthew 7. I would say that the majority of "churchgoers" (in my experience, at least) assume that Matthew 7:15-23 teaches that *anyone's* possession of eternal life can be determined by their "*fruits*". By tracking the "them" in the passage, we were able to show that "them" refers to *false prophets*. But how do we know what "fruits" means in this context? Since it is a picture of *something being produced*, *what* is being produced here? In the Bible, there are at least six different ways this term is used:

1. "fruits" as *literal fruits* ("fruit of the vine")
2. "fruits" as *Christian character* ("fruit of the Spirit", which the Spirit produces)
3. "fruits" as *converts* ("the fruit of your ministry")
4. "fruits" as *children* ("fruit of the womb")
5. "fruits" as *words* ("the fruit of your mouth", what your tongue produces)
6. "fruits" as *works or actions* ("fruit in keeping with repentance", actions produced by obedience)

Most traditional interpretation goes with definition #6, but does that fit the context? Let's take a look at Jesus' *description* of the false prophets and then decide. Jesus gives us several *word pictures* in the passage. The first is that the false prophets are wearing sheep's clothing; can you "see" the sheep? In other words, Jesus is saying that false prophets "look like" sheep.

Another picture that Jesus gives us concerns the *actions* of the false prophets. They *focus* on their "good works", as a matter of fact. The works that they did would be considered by most to be "good" things, and Jesus doesn't dispute their claims. Can you "see" their actions? Not only do the false prophets *look* like sheep, they *act* like sheep... If that is what we are "seeing", how could "fruits" possibly mean "works"? If we compare this passage to Matthew 12:33-37, it becomes obvious that the meaning that fits in this context is "*fruits*" as *words*. This is *why* Jesus would say, "*Beware of false prophets*" in the first place. They are *deceptively* "good" in how they *look and act*; it is what they are *saying* that Jesus wants you to examine, so that you won't be deceived!

The last question one might ask to fit the all pieces together is: why would Jesus accuse them of *practicing lawlessness*? If the false prophets are *prophesying falsehood*, that in itself is lawless. Besides the ninth commandment, see Zechariah 8:16: *These are the things you shall do: Speak each man the truth to his neighbor; Give judgment in your gates for truth, justice, and peace...* So false prophets can *do lots of good works and still practice lawlessness*. Beware! Know the truth so that you won't be misled by their actions...