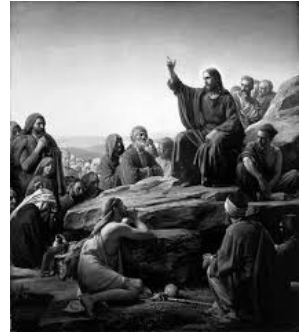


WHEN FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE SOUNDS LITERAL

Matthew 5:29–30

Introduction:

1. Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:29–30 is among the most startling in the New Testament.
2. At first glance, it sounds like He is calling for physical mutilation — removing body parts to deal with sin.
3. In this sermon, we will consider why Jesus used such shocking language, why some people misinterpret it, and why careful study and context are crucial when reading God's word.



1. Why Jesus Used Such Shocking Language:

- a. He was emphasizing the deadly seriousness of sin: Sin is not to be taken lightly. Jesus had just warned that looking on a woman to lust is equivalent to adultery in the heart (Matthew 5:28). Following this, He speaks of removing the eye or hand to stress how dangerous sin is and how urgently it must be dealt with (Matthew 5:29–30).
- b. He was using deliberate hyperbole to make the teaching unforgettable: Jesus frequently employed exaggeration to emphasize His points and leave a lasting impression. For example, He said it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 19:24). This method of speaking was designed to jolt His hearers into serious reflection and repentance.
- c. He was drawing from the biblical tradition of shocking figurative commands: Scripture has a pattern of using strong, vivid commands to make moral points. Proverbs 23:2 says, “And put a knife to thy throat, if thou be a man given to appetite” (Proverbs 23:2). This is not a call for self-harm, but a figurative way of saying: exercise strong self-control over your desires (Proverbs 23:2).

2. Why Some People Take These Words Literally:

- a. They approach scripture with a rigid, hyper-literal mindset: Without understanding the use of figures of speech, some conclude Jesus meant what He said in a literal, physical sense. A similar misunderstanding happened in John 6:53, where Jesus said, “Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.” Many of His listeners were offended because they misunderstood the figurative language (John 6:53).
- b. They fail to consider the surrounding context and spiritual point being made: When removed from context, Jesus’ statements about the eye and hand can seem like instructions for self-harm. But in context, He is teaching about the heart and the root causes of sin. Paul uses similar language in Colossians 3:5 when he says, “Mortify [put to death] therefore your members [parts of the body] which are upon the earth...” — meaning to put sinful desires to death, not to injure the body (Colossians 3:5).
- c. They may be influenced by a mindset that confuses physical pain with holiness: Some have historically believed that punishing the body makes one more spiritual. While self-discipline is necessary, bodily harm is not godliness. Paul reminds us that bodily exercise has a little profit, but godliness is profitable unto all things (1 Timothy 4:8).

3. Why It Matters How We Read These Passages:

- a. Misreading scripture leads to misapplication in practice: If we misinterpret figurative commands as literal ones, we may end up twisting God's word and applying it in harmful ways. Paul instructs Timothy to “rightly divide the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15), which means we must understand what is literal, what is figurative, and what the true message is (2 Timothy 2:15).
- b. Studying the context helps us to discern the true meaning: When we read in context, we see that Jesus was calling for radical spiritual action, not physical mutilation. In Nehemiah 8:8, the Levites not only read the law but also gave the meaning, helping the people understand. We must do the same when we study scripture (Nehemiah 8:8).

- c. Without careful interpretation, scripture can be misused and misunderstood: Peter said that some things in Paul's letters are hard to understand and that some twist them "unto their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16). Without careful handling of the word, well-meaning believers can end up confused, misguided, or misled — as sometimes happens when people fail to see the figurative nature of certain texts (2 Peter 3:16).

Conclusion:

1. Jesus' words about cutting off a hand or plucking out an eye were never meant to be taken literally.
2. Like other strong figurative passages — Proverbs 23:2, John 6:53, and Colossians 3:5 — they use bold language to drive home a spiritual point.
3. The goal is not physical harm, but spiritual urgency: we must remove sin from our lives decisively and completely.
4. This lesson reminds us that interpretation matters. We must seek to understand not just what is said, but what is meant.
5. A careless or overly literal reading of scripture can lead to confusion, legalism, or fear — but proper study leads to understanding and growth.

Applications:

1. Examine your life for sources of temptation and be willing to remove them: Just as Jesus taught the need to "cut off" what causes one to stumble, we must identify habits, influences, or environments that consistently lead us toward sin and take decisive action (Matthew 5:29–30).
2. Learn to recognize when scripture is using figurative language: Understanding the difference between literal and figurative language is vital for correct interpretation. The Bereans were commended for searching the scriptures daily to see whether what they heard was true (Acts 17:11).
3. Approach scripture with humility and a desire to understand the intended meaning: Instead of rushing to apply a verse literally, ask, "What is the point being made?" and prayerfully seek wisdom (Proverbs 4:7).
4. Develop a habit of reading the Bible in its context: Read before and after a passage to understand its full setting. This guards against isolated misinterpretation and helps reveal the full meaning (2 Timothy 2:15).
5. Take sin seriously and pursue holiness with resolve: Jesus' language reminds us that sin is no small matter. True repentance involves not only sorrow for sin but also action to separate from it (Romans 6:12–13).

Questions:

1. Did Jesus really mean for people to cut off body parts to avoid sin?
2. Why does Jesus use such extreme imagery in His teaching?
3. Are there other places in the Bible where people misunderstood figurative language?
4. What does "mortify your members" mean in Colossians 3:5?
5. What can we do to avoid misinterpreting difficult passages?

Questions & Answers

1. Did Jesus really mean for people to cut off body parts to avoid sin?

Answer: No. Jesus was using hyperbole to show how seriously we must deal with sin. The focus is on removing the cause of sin from one's life, not physical mutilation (**Matthew 5:29–30**).

2. Why does Jesus use such extreme imagery in His teaching?

Answer: To shock the listener into awareness and drive home the gravity of the message. This was a common teaching method in both Jewish culture and among the prophets (**Matthew 19:24; Proverbs 23:2**).

3. Are there other places in the Bible where people misunderstood figurative language?

Answer: Yes. In John 6:53, many misunderstood Jesus' figurative statement about eating His flesh and drinking His blood, and as a result, many walked away from Him (**John 6:66**).

4. What does “mortify your members” mean in Colossians 3:5?

Answer: It means to put to death sinful desires and actions — not to harm the body, but to reject and eliminate sinful behaviors from one's life (**Colossians 3:5**).

5. What can we do to avoid misinterpreting difficult passages?

Answer: We must study with care, read in context, seek the intended meaning, and be willing to ask for help or compare scripture with scripture (**2 Peter 3:16; Nehemiah 8:8**).