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LUKE 14:26: HATE OR HYPERBOLE?

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My initiation into the misinterpretation of hyperbole occurred half-a-century ago when I sat listening as an adolescent to a Christian radio program in my family's farmhouse in Iowa. The speaker's text was Jesus' statement that "if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you" (Matt. 17:20).¹ The preacher began, "Now let me say right from the start that I believe that the mountains of which Jesus is speaking are spiritual and psychological mountains."

Anyone who has prayed for something as Jesus describes and not seen it performed knows that the literal interpretation of His statement is faulty. A strained "spiritual" interpretation, however, is not the only alternative. By the time I had completed my literary education, I had learned about a figure of speech called *hyperbole* that provides another way of understanding such exaggerated statements. The evidence is abundant, however, that critics of Christianity and some Christians do not place much stock in hyperbole.

Should We Hate Our Family? In this article, I want to pay particular attention to Jesus' statement in Luke 14:26: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."

One way to misinterpret this verse is to take it literally. Cults often operate on the premise that the statement is literally true — that it pits loyalty to the group against love for family. In doing so, they attempt to distance followers from family members who might make them fall away.

Critics of Christianity in turn point to the verse in order to denigrate the Christian faith. An atheist, for example, quotes the verse as "a perfect illustration of how a cult operates. Sort of makes you wonder about all those conservative religionists that preach 'traditional family values!'"²

A deist scolds Christians who do *not* interpret the verse literally. After noting that Luke chose the Greek word meaning "hate" and not another word meaning "love less," this person writes, "All you are attempting here is to explain away an uncomfortable teaching because you cannot live up to it; in effect, you do not really believe it."³

Someone who calls himself a satanist castigates Christianity on the ground that, in light of Jesus' statement, "one must question Christ's idea of the family."⁴

One final aberration needs to be added to the mix. A gnostic source asserts that early Assyrian churches took Jesus' statement to mean that only celibate men could become Christians.⁵

A Way out of the Maze. It is obvious that a literal interpretation of Jesus' statement leads to disastrous results; but what is the alternative to interpreting it literally? The only viable option is to regard the statement as being a *hyperbole* — a conscious exaggeration that expresses truth in a nonliteral manner.

It apparently is not easy for people to label a statement as being a hyperbole. On the surface, it may seem to signal a lack of faith when we do not take the great promises of Scripture at face value. After all, "all things are possible with God" (Mark 10:27). Interpreting hyperbolic statements literally, however, lands us in much greater difficulties than interpreting them figuratively does.

Hyperbole in the Bible. The starting point for reestablishing hyperbole as a genuine conveyer of truth is to note how often it appears in the Bible: “By my God I can leap over a wall” (Ps. 18:29); “I beat [my enemies] fine as dust before the wind” (Ps. 18:42); “A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you” (Ps. 91:7); “You are all together beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you” (Song 4:7); The wicked “cannot sleep unless they have done wrong; they are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble” (Prov. 4:16).

If we are still in doubt that hyperbole is a legitimate way to express truth, we can turn to the example of Jesus. Elton Trueblood shows in his book *The Humor of Christ* that the most distinctive feature of Jesus’ discourses is their use of exaggeration — the preposterous overstatement in the mode of “our conventional Texas story, which no one believes literally, but which everyone remembers.”⁶ G. K. Chesterton notes that “Christ had even a literary style of his own....The diction used by Christ is quite curiously gigantesque; it is full of camels leaping through needles and mountains hurled into the sea.”⁷

This is, in fact, accurate; for example: “When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (Matt. 6:3); “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (Matt. 19:24); The kingdom of God “is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches” (Luke 13:19).

If we realize how frequently hyperbole is used in the Bible, we can avoid being timid when we come upon examples of it. It takes a certain amount of courage to stake one’s claim that Jesus’ statement about hating one’s family is an exaggeration. We need to understand, however, that no matter *how* we interpret the statement, we are engaging in interpretation; to claim that Jesus is telling us literally to hate our family is no less daring than to decide that He is exaggerating.

How Hyperbole Works. If the biblical writers and Jesus Himself did not hesitate to use hyperbole, we should not be intimidated when we encounter it; but three questions need to be answered:

How can we tell when a statement is hyperbolic? The test is easy: whenever a statement cannot be literally true in the way or to the degree to which the statement claims, it must be exaggerated; for example: “You will tread on the lion and the adder” (Ps. 91:13); “How can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye?” (Luke 6:42). We know that people generally do not literally trample on lions and snakes, just as it is highly unlikely for a person literally to have a log in his or her eye — and not notice it! We know that a statement is an exaggeration when the literal interpretation violates our common sense logic and observation of how things generally operate.

Why do speakers and writers use overstatement? They speak hyperbolically for the same reason we do. We might say, for example, “I wrote on that ridiculous test *until my arm fell off*,” or, “*Everyone* agrees that this teacher is unfair.” The general principle is that hyperbole expresses emotional truth rather than literal truth. The examples cited above express feelings of exasperation and outrage.

Hyperbole can also express extreme conviction. The psalmist, for example, wrote, “One thing have I asked of the Lord...” (Ps. 27:4). We know that in fact David asked *many* things of the Lord; but he exalted his desire to worship God to the status of his *only* request in order to signal his conviction that asking for the ability and desire to worship God is the most important request that one can make.

Hyperbole is also a way of grabbing a reader’s or listener’s attention. Whenever a truth is in danger of becoming a cliché, the use of hyperbole can rescue it from indifference (or what J. R. R. Tolkien called “the drab blur of triteness or familiarity”⁸). It often does so by producing a shock effect. This seems to be the purpose for many of Jesus’ hyperboles: “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away” (Matt. 5:29); “Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead” (Matt. 8:22).

How do we extract a literal principle of truth from a hyperbole? We need to scale back the element of exaggeration in a hyperbole and then infer the principle that remains. Jesus does not want us literally to

hate our family members and ourselves in order to follow Him. If we put the exaggerated element in the statement into the background, we are left with the principle that devotion to Christ is the most important relationship that we can have, and that it must take precedence over all human relationships. The element of exaggeration represented by the verb *hate* exists to express the heightened conviction and passion with which Jesus made the statement.

— Leland Ryken

NOTES

1. All Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version.
2. Jon Nelson, "An Irreverent Look at the Bible," The Atheist Alliance Web Center, http://www.atheistalliance.org/library/nelson-irreverant_bible.html.
3. Reverend Peter, "Why Christainity [sic] Fails," Deism: Belief in God Without the Baggage, MSN Groups, <http://groups.msn.com/DEISMbeliefinGodwithoutthebaggage/whychristainityfails1.msnw>.
4. "Morality And Paradoxes," Satan2000.com, <http://www.satan2000.com/christians/moralityparadoxes.htm#hate-your-family>.
5. J. S. Chiappalone, Annwn News, December 1997, <http://www.fortunecity.com/roswell/prophesy/23/News/Dec97.htm>.
6. Elton Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 47–48.
7. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1959), 146. For a full scholarly treatment of hyperbole in Jesus' sayings, see Robert H. Stein, *Difficult Sayings in the Gospels; Jesus' Use of Overstatement and Hyperbole* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), which offers 13 criteria for assessing hyperbole, discusses the functions of hyperbole, and surveys examples of hyperbole in Scripture.
8. J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, ed. C. S. Lewis (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1966), 74.