

## Di121 Effective Communication

### *Lesson Di121-13 Method: Using Figurative Language*

All cultures use figurative language to gain and hold a person's attention. Literal language, the opposite of figurative, uses the normal meaning of words. Figurative language uses common words to express another meaning, often suggesting a picture. This method uses literal meanings of words to represent non-literal concepts. Examples of non-literal meanings include the idea of animals speaking or people doing what normally would be impossible things. The Bible uses such language in poetry to express deep truths and to describe emotions. Jesus used this method to express new ideas, including the deep changes that occur when someone surrenders to him. John tells us of one such event in chapter three of his Gospel.

The story is about Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

Jesus understood the testimony of this important religious leader in Israel. As a member of the religious ruling body, Nicodemus believed Jesus was sent by God. The many miracles Nicodemus had either seen or heard about proved this to be true. Yet he hesitated to accept Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus understood this and prepared to move him to a place of faith. We see this in his use of figurative language. Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

"How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus used the figure of speech, "born again," to grab the attention of Nicodemus. Jesus employed these words to help Nicodemus understand the radical kind of change God wanted for his life. His immediate response was one of total rejection. Then he realized that there must be a meaning to these words beyond the usual one. But what exactly was that meaning? Jesus answered with a fuller explanation: "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

Jesus spoke about two kinds of birth. One was human birth, which started with a flood of water from the mother. The second was spiritual birth, which begins with a flow of the Spirit of God. Jesus meant that Nicodemus must experience a change that only the power of the Spirit can give. After the experience, he would be led by the Spirit of God to do his will. Nicodemus did not understand the comparison between the literal wind and a person led by the Holy Spirit either.

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? ... Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him” (John 3:2-15).

Jesus explained that he used an earthly figure to explain a spiritual experience. He had to start there, because even as a religious leader, Nicodemus still understood only earthly events, things he had seen. Since Jesus came from heaven, he could explain things he had seen there. Then Jesus spoke about his future. In ancient times, Moses had lifted up a serpent made of brass to bring healing to those dying of snakebites (Num. 21:9). In a similar way, Jesus would be lifted on a cross. Those dying in sin that look to him will be healed of sin and given eternal life. Again, Jesus was explaining the meaning of a “figure,” the brass snake, to teach the spiritual lesson of his coming crucifixion.

John then summarized the message of Jesus for his listeners: “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:1-16). The verse represented the purpose for John’s gospel. It also tells us the full meaning of the words “born again.” We know Nicodemus later believed this truth, because he helped bury Jesus.

In Jesus’ communication, he often used figurative language. By using such language he captured the attention of his listeners and made them want the explanation. In John chapter three Jesus used the image of being “born again” to show that he brings a completely new life to anyone who believes on him. This new life in Christ is so different from the old one, that the Bible says we have actually “died to our old life.” That phrase represents yet another use of figurative language.

This story is **important** because it demonstrates how Jesus used figurative language to explain eternal truth to unbelievers who were seeking truth.

The **main truth** this lesson teaches is that Jesus used literal word pictures to teach spiritual truths and to explain the new life he desires to give to all who believe.

Let’s **review** this lesson—

1. Who did Nicodemus say was the source of Jesus’ miracle power? [Pause.]  
A. If you said that Nicodemus gave credit to God as the source of Jesus’ power, you are right.
2. What did Jesus say must happen before a person can enter the kingdom of God? [Pause.]  
A. If you answered, “No one can see the kingdom of God unless that person is born again,” you are correct.
3. Why did Jesus often teach using figurative language? [Pause.]  
A. If you said, “His purpose was to capture the attention of seekers and make them want the explanation of the meaning,” you are correct.

Your **assignment** consists of listening to this story several times. After you have learned it, tell it to someone who has not heard it before. Then ask them this question, “How may the use of figurative language by Jesus have affected the teaching methods of the early disciples?”

Answer: They probably did the same kind of teaching as he did. This method made the lesson taught easy to remember. This was especially true for those who could not write down what they heard. Discuss some “figures” of language that are commonly used in your culture to stand for something more than their literal meaning.