

# **Dr. George Payton, Bible Translation, Session 24, Rhetorical Questions and Rhetorical Statements**

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This is Dr. George Payton in his teaching on Bible translation. This is session 24, Rhetorical Questions and Rhetorical Statements.

In this presentation, we're talking about another translation challenge, and that is rhetorical questions and rhetorical statements.

We normally think of rhetorical questions, but rhetorical statements are not something that is often discussed. We want to see how both of these can present challenges to Bible translators and Bible interpreters. So, every language has questions, as far as we know.

And usually, they're used to asking for information. Things like, what time is it? Or when are our guests coming? How many loaves of bread are you buying? Who is that talking to Jim? So we have these information types of questions. But there are other purposes for questions.

And we saw some of that when we looked at speech act theory, where you can say things like, can you pass the salt? And then that's not a question for information; that's a polite request. So, questions can be used in different ways. And sometimes, a question can be used as an answer to someone.

You are asked a question, and then you answer it with a question, but the question that you respond to is actually something more than that. For example, let's say that a young woman in high school, Susan, comes home from school, and after she gets there for a while, then she asks her mom if she can watch TV. Can I watch TV? And so this is an actual request, straight up, just what it looks like.

And Mom says, have you finished your homework? Now, that is a request for information, but it's more than that. So, Mom answered that it was based on the house rules. Both Mom and Susan know that you have to do your homework first before you do anything else.

For example, watching television. If you have finished your homework, then the answer is yes, you can watch television. If you haven't finished your homework, then why are you even asking? So, Mom says this, and all she needs to do is ask the question. Susan already knows the answer, whether it's yes or no, because she knows whether she did her homework.

And she says yes, and then she gets to watch TV. If she hasn't done her homework yet, she walks away, and then she comes back later when she has finished her homework. All of that is couched in that question: Have you done your homework? So, there's always more to things on the surface that we don't really see, but we do understand that.

And so that's one of the other usages of questions. But the issue that we want to look at now is another type of question. It's common in many languages.

All the languages that I've come across have rhetorical questions, and they're not literal questions asking for information, but they are used for some kind of effect. Rhetorical comes from the word rhetoric. Rhetoric is trying to influence someone, trying to influence their thinking, or their behavior, or their understanding.

And so, they're not meant to be taken literally. The problem is, how do we recognize them when they come to us from another language, like Greek or Hebrew, translated into our language? So, for example, in Mark 8:36, what is the profit of man to gain the whole world and lose his soul? And with rhetorical questions, we don't expect an answer. Most often, the people who hear it know what the answer is.

They know that it's not a question. And in this particular question here above, it's obvious that the answer is that it doesn't profit a man anything if he gets everything and loses his soul. He ends up losing in the end.

So, all of that is couched in that simple question: what does it profit a man? So, sometimes, it's not easy to determine whether a question is real or rhetorical. So, I have some verses here, and then we can discuss whether it is real or is it rhetorical. Is the person asking for information, or are they using it for a rhetorical effect? First, God is treating you as sons, for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? Real or rhetorical? Probably rhetorical. Okay, how about this one? This is the case when Jesus was in the crowd, and the woman with the issue of blood touched him, and he said, who touched my garments? Is that a real question or a rhetorical question? I think it was a real question.

And the disciples said, excuse me, sir, we're getting pushed to and fro. We're surrounded by a mob of people. And the answer is everybody is touching you.

What do you mean, who is touching me? Look around; there are about 15 or 20 people trying to touch you. So, they took it as a real question, so they tried to answer it, right? Okay, next one. First Timothy 3.5, for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God's church? And the implication is, if a man does not know how to manage his own household, he cannot care for God's church.

Acts 2:7, and they were amazed and wondered, saying, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And the answer is, these guys are all Galileans. We all know that. Matthew 13:10, then the disciples came and said to Jesus, why do you speak to them in parables? If we read Matthew and the passage corresponding to Mark, the disciples really wanted to know what was going on. Because in speaking to the people in parables, even the disciples sometimes didn't understand it.

This then leads to the question of what is the Parable of the Sower. Will you please explain that to us? So, this is a real question, or it seems to be. And this is the parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13:27: did you not sow the good seed in your field? How, then, has it weeds? We have two questions there. The first one seems to be rhetorical.

Didn't we already plant a good seed? And these workers probably were the ones who actually did it. So, the answer is, we know that we planted good seeds. Then the actual question is, how is it possible that these tares grew up if we were the ones who planted good seeds? So here are some other ones. Mark 3.4, is it lawful to do good or to harm on the Sabbath, to save a life, or to kill? But they kept silent.

This is Jesus in Mark 3 when he's healing someone on the Sabbath, and he's asking these questions of the Pharisees, and they were looking for a reason to call Jesus out. He says this to them, but they keep silent. Now, could they have answered? Maybe.

Mark 4.30, they're in the boat, there's a storm, Jesus is asleep. Teacher, don't you care we are perishing? Sounds rhetorical. Mark 4:30, Mark 4:40, and he said to them, why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith? So, is Jesus confused? Is he asking for information? Probably not.

And in one way, he's saying that to them. It doesn't, though, come across as being harsh. Maybe it's somehow a polite or a more gentle rebuke.

In Mark 3:4, it seems to be that he was calling them out and was upset with them. You could just hear the Torah in his voice, and it says later that he was so disturbed in his spirit that he was angry at them. Mark 4.41, following Mark 4.40, after the sea had been calmed, and he said, don't you have any faith? They said, who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him.

Is that real or rhetorical? Maybe a bit of both. So, it's not always easy to determine if it's a real one or a rhetorical one. But one clue is, did the people who were asked the question answer the question? And if they didn't, it might be rhetorical.

And if you're talking about the group of disciples asking each other, none of them knew the answer. So, another clue is, does it sound like the person who asked did

not know the information? Can we say that the disciples didn't really realize who Jesus was at that point? Yeah, there's a good case for that. Okay.

So, the first issue is in determining whether it's a real question or a rhetorical question. Related to that is, what is the function of the question? Why did the person say it, or what is it used to say? Rebuking is a common one, but it's not the only one. We get other ones in the Bible, which then pose interpretive questions as to why it was said.

We understand that it's said, but we don't always understand why it's said until we look a little deeper into the text. Okay, so we try to deduce what the function is based on the words that were used in the question and the words in the content, but also on the context, the situation, and the scenario that the people are in. Okay, so one of the things that is used for is to state or emphasize the fact that it's obviously true.

So in Mark 3:23, Jesus says, how can Satan cast out Satan? This is obvious: Satan can't cast out Satan. Another one, Goliath, on the battlefield, says, am I not a Philistine and you the soldiers of Saul? It's an obvious thing, so you come out and say that. And so, certainly, they all knew that.

John 18:35, when Jesus is, let's say, discussing, maybe debating with Pilate, and Jesus says, did someone tell you about me, or did you already know that? And he said, am I a Jew? Which means what? I'm not a Jew. How do I know? Okay, so it's an obvious fact. I am certainly not a Jew. All right, another one is to focus on a particular condition or situation, especially when there might be multiple possibilities.

So, James 4, excuse me, 5:13 and 14, is there any among you suffering? Let him pray. Is any cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is any among you sick? Let him call the elders and have them lay hands on you.

And so, the sense is, if someone is like this, they should do that. Or whoever's like this, let them do that. But it's led to these rhetorical questions.

Sometimes, it's to introduce a new topic or to draw attention to something. In Ruth 3 1, Naomi says to her daughter-in-law, my daughter, shall I not seek security for you that it may be well for you? And then she goes on to say something else. Ruth doesn't even answer that.

I was reading a commentary, and it said, so Naomi asked this rhetorical question, and Ruth obviously thought in her mind the answer is yes. I don't know that that was the purpose for Naomi asking. It seemed to be that she was leaning into something new, and she was broaching the topic.

This is a way of broaching the topic and getting into that situation and topic. The NIV and the NLT break down the rhetorical question, and they say it in a statement. I should help you find a secure home.

Interesting. Okay. Mark 4:30 and 31, how shall we picture the kingdom of God or by what parable shall we present it? It is like a mustard seed and so on.

In that case, Jesus is not confused. He's not; gosh, man, let me think of something about how to say this. He's introducing a new topic, and it's a transition from the other things that he said before.

He gives one parable, and then he does this transition, and then he gives another parable, and so on. We've covered so far to focus on a particular condition, to focus, to introduce a new topic, or to state something obvious. Another one is to rebuke someone, and this is the one that we expect, but it's not always the one.

Mom catches her three-year-old son sitting on the floor eating cookies in the cookie jar, and she says, what are you doing? And the son says, duh, mom, what's it look like? I'm eating cookies. No, he doesn't do that. He's three years old, and he's scarfing these cookies, and he gets in trouble, and he's like, oh, I'm sorry, Mom.

Okay. She's rebuking him. She's not asking for information.

Matthew 12:34, Jesus is rebuking the Pharisees. You brood of vipers, how can you be evil? Speak what is good. So, he's calling them out.

Mark 8:17 to 20, they have just fed the 5,000, and they get on the boat, and Jesus says to them, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees. And they said, oh darn, he's upset that we didn't make it, that we forgot to take the bread. And he says I'm not asking you about bread.

And then he asked them several questions. But the first question that he asked was, don't you understand? And the last question that he asked is, do you really still not understand? This may or may not be a harsh rebuke, but it does sound like he's then calling them out. And the other question that he had previously in Mark 3 when he said, don't you have any faith? Are you worried? Or excuse me, Mark 4, don't you have any faith? When he calmed the sea.

Another one is one of my favorite ones that we see from Paul. You foolish Galatians, who bewitched you to believe this nonsense? That's pretty straight-up a rebuke. That's akin to Jesus calling the Pharisees and priests a brood of vipers.

And then, if you read the following verses, Paul goes over and over and over. Didn't you believe this? Don't you realize that? And he goes over and over and over in that whole thing. He's calling them out.

Okay. All right. Expressing emotion or uncertainty.

So, in Mark 8:11 and 12, the Pharisees argue with Jesus, asking him for a sign, and he sighs deeply in his spirit. Why does this generation seek a sign? I think he was aggrieved in his spirit. And he then does what he says.

He's not speaking to them. It's different than in Mark 9, where Jesus says to the people who are talking to him after he came down from the mountain. And he says, you unbelieving generation, how long shall I put up with you? He's speaking directly to them.

But here he's kind of speaking just within himself. But he actually says these things. Okay.

In Mark 12:17, the parable of the man that had the barns and he needed to build a bigger barn. And then he's considering, what shall I do since I have no place to put all my crops? So, he's mulling things over. He's ruminating.

He's thinking about this. Okay. And then sometimes it's a polite request or a suggestion.

In Mark 5, the parable, excuse me, is the situation where Jesus was with Jairus going to heal Jairus's daughter. Then, the woman with the issue of blood comes up. And then he heals that woman, and she goes off.

And then people come from Jairus's home, and they report to Jairus, your daughter's dead. Why trouble the teacher any further? Again, I don't think this is a rebuke for two reasons. One, it doesn't sound like they're being harsh.

Two, they're speaking to their boss. In a culture like that, they never call out their boss, especially in front of people. So maybe it's something like, let us not trouble the teacher anymore.

So, it's a polite suggestion or, hey, let's do this. It's said in more of a, not in an imperative mood. Yeah.

The subjunctive is the term, but it's polite. Let us do this. Or maybe it would be good to... All right.

So, the first thing we have to do is determine whether it is real or rhetorical. And that's what we ask ourselves as we're doing our analysis. The second thing is, what is the function of the rhetorical question? And we try to deduce that. The list that I gave is not maybe complete.

There could be other things. But we try to figure out as best we can roughly what the rhetorical question is doing or why they used it in this way. The next thing is, does the target language even have rhetorical questions? I'm trying to think of any languages that I've come across that didn't have them.

The question is, how do rhetorical questions function in the target language? And as we said, we don't use rhetorical questions to introduce a new topic. Sometimes, we do it to summarize. You ever heard a pastor give a sermon, and he's talking about point one, and then point two, and point three, and then he'll ask something like, so what are we saying here? And then he'll draw his conclusion.

So, we use it in that way, but we generally don't have a pastor come up and say, so what's today's message about? They usually don't start with that. They usually start with something else. So, the question is, do the target languages that we work with have rhetorical questions that function in the same way as the ones in the Bible? They might have rhetorical questions, some of which function like biblical ones, and some of them in the Bible may not match up with the target language.

So, if they do have rhetorical questions, and the sense of the question is clear to the target language speakers, then we could just translate it using that same form in the form of a question. I remember I was working with a group of people in Namibia doing some oral translating of the book of Mark, and we covered about five or six chapters in. And what they would do is they had a recording of an elderly man who had narrated the passage that we're looking at, and then they would play it for me.

He happened not to be there, so they played it for me, and then they gave me a verbal translation of what he said into English. So this was in one of the languages, the Himba language. So the Himba men would say it, and then they would tell me what that meant.

I remember this one section we came across where Jesus was asking a series of questions. And I don't know how this man, whether he was told that they were rhetorical or not, but this is what he did. He would say he knew that they were rhetorical.

And that word, Nahi, is a Himba expression. It doesn't mean anything. It means I'm asking it rhetorically, right? And even that, an intonation, you can just tell that he was asking questions.

In Swahili, if you're asking something and it's an obvious answer, then you might say, so, are you my boss? The answer is, no, you're not. Why are you telling me what to do? So, they use corny in that way. And in Orma, they have a word, Uri.

So that's another one. So, these languages might have these little particles that they can use in order to communicate that these questions are rhetorical. And I just thought of another one in Swahili, Jay.

So, we're out of food right now. What about tomorrow? And they'll say, tomorrow, Jay? That's another one. It's a rhetorical question.

So, we have to look for ways in the target language to communicate these rhetorical questions in a natural way. And when you do it, it is really impactful. It just sounds so beautiful in their language.

And they get it instantly. What happens if they don't have it? Then, we need to think of another way to say it. Because if we leave it as a question, it's not going to communicate.

So, we have to look for a way to rephrase it. And this is a grammatical thing. It's a little bit of a higher-level language issue.

It's not straight-up grammar, but it's somehow language usage. Okay. So rhetorical statements or directives are sentences that are not meant to be taken literally because they are used for the impact or effect.

So, for example, rhetorical statements are used rhetorically, and rhetorical questions are questions that are used for emphasis or effect. So, rhetorical statements or rhetorical directives. So, for example, your friend is about to make a bad decision, and you advise him not to, and you tell him, sure, that's a great idea.

I'm sure it will really turn out well. He knows that you aren't serious. He knows that you don't really think that.

You say it for effect. We do this all the time and don't even realize we're doing it. Oh yeah, that's a great idea.

Yeah. So, we get these in the Bible. They're not super common, but we do get them.

So, we need to realize that they are not meant to be taken literally. Then, the question is, should we leave it as a statement? Or should we alter it some way or adjust it somehow so that people who are reading the text realize that it's not a straight-up statement for giving information? So, we need to do something. Here's one.



This is John 11, around the time that Lazarus died, and Jesus delayed two more days intentionally so that Lazarus would surely die. And then he said to the disciples, let's go to Judea again. And the disciples said to him, Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and you are going again? And then this whole thing about, don't you know that Herod is after you? And Jesus says, Herod, that fox, that little pipsqueak, I don't care about Herod.

I've got work to do. And then he says, and they weren't getting it. And then he says, plainly, Lazarus is dead.

And I'm glad for your sakes that I was not there so that you may believe. But let us go to him. Therefore, Thomas, who was called Didymus, the twin, said to his fellow disciples, let us also go that we may die with him.

That's actually a rhetorical statement. To be honest, the way that it is read in English is kind of flat. It doesn't seem to have a powerful rhetorical effect, at least not on me when I read it.

And sometimes you read it, and you go, okay, what is that? And then you just go on, and you don't really realize he's not being sarcastic, but he's not being literal. They were not ready to go and die with Jesus. They were not saying, you know what, wherever Jesus goes, if he dies, we're going to die.

That's what Peter did when they were at the Last Supper. And he says, if you're going to die, I'm going with you, and I'm going to die. We don't get that here.

This is a rhetorical statement that is often missed. The one that we had the other day, in the other lecture, excuse me, the man that had the son that was demon-possessed. And then he says to Jesus, but if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.

And Jesus said, if you can, all things are possible to him who believes. And immediately, the boy's father cried out and said, I do believe, help me in my unbelief. We discussed that previously, but just as a matter of reviewing if you can, it's not clear what that's doing there.

Is it a rhetorical statement? Is it a rhetorical question? The NLT makes it a rhetorical question, and then they even add to it by saying, what do you mean if I can? For other ones, put a question mark if you can. In English, we have to use voice intonation in order to emphasize, but we're emphasizing something that's static words on a page. Other translations in English take this as Jesus saying, well if you can believe, all things are possible.

They take it as a literal statement that Jesus is talking to the Father by saying that, and saying, if you can believe, so there are different ways of interpreting it because it is confusing. It is hard.

I can't say definitively, I know for sure that this is a rhetorical statement, but it certainly has more going on in the text that if you just take that as a literal Jesus encouraging the man to have faith, that is a possibility. If you look at the text it's a legitimate interpretation. There seems to be more going on, though.

Okay. The next one is found in Mark 14. They're in the garden of Gethsemane.

Jesus went off to pray, and he came and found them sleeping and said to them, Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Keep watching and praying that you may not come into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. And he went again and prayed, saying the same words.

Again, he came back and found them sleeping, with their eyes very heavy, and they did not know how to answer him. So we take that first one. Simon, are you asleep? As a rhetorical question.

Actually, the Greek, you look at it, it could be a rhetorical question or a rhetorical statement because there are no question marks in Greek. It just says, Simon, you are sleeping. But we take that as a rhetorical question.

Then he says this. Then he came the third time and told them to keep sleeping and resting. Is he really telling them they should continue sleeping? I heard a sermon on this once, and the pastor said Jesus was concerned about it.

They were tired. They'd been going all day. It was the Passover.

They hadn't slept, and he was concerned about them. You guys, go ahead and rest a little bit. It was enough.

The hour has come. Behold, the Son of Man is being betrayed. Get up.

Let's go. Sorry. The time that he said keep on sleeping and the time that he said let's get up and go is about two seconds.

So, the likelihood that he's encouraging them to sleep is very, very low, if not impossible. Interestingly enough, many English translations translate this. Are you still sleeping and resting? Interesting. They've turned it into a rhetorical question because sleeping and resting doesn't seem to make sense.

So, you go back to your friend who's making this decision,

and you say that's a great idea. That's really going to turn out well. And he says, but I'm going to do it anyway.

And you say what? Fine, go ahead and do it then. You don't actually tell him to do it, but this is in the imperative mood in the Greek. Keep sleeping and rest.

Interesting. Okay, so these can pose problems even for understanding. These can pose problems when translating it.

And how should we translate it? Should we translate this particular one as a rhetorical question? If the language that we're going into, that we're translating into does not have rhetorical statements, then that would be a problem in communication. That would be a good reason to move on and say this in a rhetorical question, as many English versions do. And so one of the things is, are we doing something that's wildly unusual? And the answer is no because we have several English versions that do that.

Therefore, that's justification or some support for our choosing to do this. So, where does this leave us? So we recognize that it is a rhetorical statement, and we ask, what is the function? Is it a rebuke or something else? And remember that if we use the Greek or Hebrew forms, we have to ask ourselves, will people understand the rhetorical effect that the writer intended? And as we said, most versions translate John 11, 16, when Jesus says, or when Thomas said, Father, let's go to Jerusalem and die. They translate it literally.

I haven't seen any of them translate it other than just straight up the exact form and the exact wording of Thomas. But as I said, that sounds somewhat unimpactful. Second, they vary in how they interpret and render Mark 9, 23, and 24, and often, it's unclear.

The NLC takes a step of faith, as it were, and makes it into a rhetorical question and makes it really, really clear that Jesus says, what do you mean if you can? Now, are they adding words to Jesus? Did he say those words? Some might argue, yes. Is the rhetorical effect changed? The case can be made; no, it's not changed. So, what is the most important thing here? The most important thing here is the rhetorical effect and keeping the words.

So, we have to balance both. The third thing is that most of the versions in Mark 14:41 turn it into a rhetorical question so that it is clear because they had the sense that people may not get that this is a rhetorical statement. So, we keep the form as best we can while at the same time really emphasizing the rhetorical function.

We do that for rhetorical questions and rhetorical statements. So, that is another translation issue that we wrestle with when we translate the Bible.

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