

ON CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

By Saint Aurelius Augustine

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BOOK THREE Chapter Summary of the Foregoing Books, and Scope of that Which Follows. I. The man who fears God seeks diligently in Holy Scripture for a knowledge of His will. And when he has become meek through piety, so as to have no love of strife; when furnished also with a knowledge of languages, so as not to be stopped by unknown words and forms of speech, and with the knowledge of certain necessary objects, so as not to be ignorant of the force and nature of those which are used figuratively; and assisted, besides, by accuracy in the texts, which has been secured by skill and care in the matter of correction — when thus prepared, let him proceed to the examination and solution of the ambiguities of Scripture. And that he may not be led astray by ambiguous signs, so far as I can give him instruction (it may happen, however, that either from the greatness of his intellect, or the greater clearness of the light he enjoys, he shall laugh at the methods I am going to point out as childish) — but yet, as I was going to say, so far as I can give instruction, let him who is in such a state of mind that he can be instructed by me know, that the ambiguity of Scripture lies either in proper words or in metaphorical, classes which I have already described in the second book. Chapter 2 — Rule for Removing Ambiguity by Attending to Punctuation. But when proper words make Scripture ambiguous, we must

see in the first place that there is nothing wrong in our punctuation or pronunciation. Accordingly, if, when attention is given to the passage, it shall appear to be uncertain in what way it ought to be punctuated or pronounced, let the reader consult the rule of faith which he has gathered from the plainer passages of Scripture, and from the authority of the Church, and of which I treated at sufficient length when I was speaking in the first book about things. But if both readings, or all of them (if there are more than two), give a meaning in harmony with the faith, it remains to consult the context, both what goes before and what comes after, to see which interpretation, out of many that offer themselves, it pronounces for and permits to be dovetailed into itself. Now look at some examples. The heretical pointing, John 1:1-2 *In principio erat verbum, et verbum erat apud Deum, et Deus erat,* so as to make the next sentence run, *Verbum hoc erat in principio apud Deum,* arises out of unwillingness to confess that the Word was God. But this must be rejected by the rule of faith, which, in reference to the equality of the Trinity, directs us to say: *et Deus erat verbum;* and then to add: *hoc erat in principio apud Deum.* But the following ambiguity of punctuation does not go against the faith in either way you take it, and therefore must be decided from the context. It is where the apostle says: What I shall choose I know not: for I am in a strait between two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ, which is far better: nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you. Philippians 1:22-24 Now it is uncertain whether we should read, *ex duobus concupiscentiam habens* [having a desire for two things], or *compellor autem ex duobus* [I am in a strait between two]; and so to add: *concupiscentiam habens dissolvi, et esse cum Christo* [having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ]. But since there follows *multo enim magis optimum* [for it is far better], it is evident that he says he has a desire for that which is better; so

that, while he is in a strait between two, yet he has a desire for one and sees a necessity for the other; a desire, namely, to be with Christ, and a necessity to remain in the flesh. Now this ambiguity is resolved by one word that follows, which is translated enim [for]; and the translators who have omitted this particle have preferred the interpretation which makes the apostle seem not only in a strait between two, but also to have a desire for two. We must therefore punctuate the sentence thus: et quid eligam ignoro: compellor autem ex duobus [what I shall choose I know not: for I am in a strait between two]; and after this point follows: concupiscentiam habens dissolvi, et esse cum Christo [having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ]. And, as if he were asked why he has a desire for this in preference to the other, he adds: multo enim magis optimum [for it is far better]. Why, then, is he in a strait between the two? Because there is a need for his remaining, which he adds in these terms: manere in carne necessarium propter vos [nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you]. Where, however, the ambiguity cannot be cleared up, either by the rule of faith or by the context, there is nothing to hinder us to point the sentence according to any method we choose of those that suggest themselves. As is the case in that passage to the Corinthians: Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. Receive us; we have wronged no man. 2 Corinthians 7:1-2 It is doubtful whether we should read, mundemus nos ab omni coinquinatione carnis et spiritus [let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit], in accordance with the passage, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit, 1 Corinthians 7:34 or, mundemus nos ab omni coinquinatione carnis [let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh], so as to make the next sentence, et spiritus perficientes sanctificationem in timore Dei

capite nos [and perfecting holiness of spirit in the fear of God, receive us]. Such ambiguities of punctuation, therefore, are left to the reader's discretion. Chapter 3 — How Pronunciation Serves to Remove Ambiguity. Different Kinds of Interrogation. And all the directions that I have given about ambiguous punctuations are to be observed likewise in the case of doubtful pronunciations. For these too, unless the fault lies in the carelessness of the reader, are corrected either by the rule of faith, or by a reference to the preceding or succeeding context; or if neither of these methods is applied with success, they will remain doubtful, but so that the reader will not be in fault in whatever way he may pronounce them. For example, if our faith that God will not bring any charges against His elect, and that Christ will not condemn His elect, did not stand in the way, this passage, Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? might be pronounced in such a way as to make what follows an answer to this question, God who justifies, and to make a second question, Who is he that condemns? with the answer, Christ Jesus who died. Romans 8:33-34 But as it would be the height of madness to believe this, the passage will be pronounced in such a way as to make the first part a question of inquiry, and the second a rhetorical interrogative. Now the ancients said that the difference between an inquiry and an interrogative was this, that an inquiry admits of many answers, but to an interrogative the answer must be either No or Yes. The passage will be pronounced, then, in such a way that after the inquiry, Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? what follows will be put as an interrogative: Shall God who justifies? — the answer No being understood. And in the same way we shall have the inquiry, Who is he that condemns? and the answer here again in the form of an interrogative, Is it Christ who died? Yea, rather, who is risen again? Who is even at the right hand of God? Who also makes intercession for us?— the answer No being

understood to every one of these questions. On the other hand, in that passage where the apostle says, What shall we say then? That the Gentiles which followed not after righteousness have attained to righteousness; Romans 9:30 unless after the inquiry, What shall we say then? what follows were given as the answer to this question: That the Gentiles, which followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness; it would not be in harmony with the succeeding context. But with whatever tone of voice one may choose to pronounce that saying of Nathanael's, Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? John 1:47 — whether with that of a man who gives an affirmative answer, so that out of Nazareth is the only part that belongs to the interrogation, or with that of a man who asks the whole question with doubt and hesitation — I do not see how a difference can be made. But neither sense is opposed to faith. There is, again, an ambiguity arising out of the doubtful sound of syllables; and this of course has relation to pronunciation. For example, in the passage, My bone [os meum] was not hid from You, which You made in secret, it is not clear to the reader whether he should take the word os as short or long. If he make it short, it is the singular of ossa [bones]; if he make it long, it is the singular of ora [mouths]. Now difficulties such as this are cleared up by looking into the original tongue, for in the Greek we find not στόμα [mouth], but ὀστέον [bone]. And for this reason the vulgar idiom is frequently more useful in conveying the sense than the pure speech of the educated. For I would rather have the barbarism, non est absconditum a te ossum meum, than have the passage in better Latin, but the sense less clear. But sometimes when the sound of a syllable is doubtful, it is decided by a word near it belonging to the same sentence. As, for example, that saying of the apostle, Of the which I tell you before [prædico], as I have also told you in time past [prædixi], that they which do such things shall not inherit the

kingdom of God. Galatians 5:21 Now if he had only said, Of the which I tell you before [quæ prædico vobis], and had not added, as I have also told you in time past [sicut prædixi], we could not know without going back to the original whether in the word prædico the middle syllable should be pronounced long or short. But as it is, it is clear that it should be pronounced long; for he does not say, sicut prædicavi, but sicut prædixi. Chapter 4 — How Ambiguities May Be Solved. And not only these, but also those ambiguities that do not relate either to punctuation or pronunciation, are to be examined in the same way. For example, that one in the Epistle to the Thessalonians: Propterea consolati sumus fratres in vobis. Now it is doubtful whether fratres [brethren] is in the vocative or accusative case, and it is not contrary to faith to take it either way. But in the Greek language the two cases are not the same in form; and accordingly, when we look into the original, the case is shown to be vocative. Now if the translator had chosen to say, propterea consolationem habuimus fratres in vobis, he would have followed the words less literally, but there would have been less doubt about the meaning; or, indeed, if he had added nostri, hardly any one would have doubted that the vocative case was meant when he heard propterea consolati sumus fratres nostri in vobis. But this is a rather dangerous liberty to take. It has been taken, however, in that passage to the Corinthians, where the apostle says, I protest by your rejoicing [per vestram gloriam] which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily. 1 Corinthians 15:31 For one translator has it, per vestram juro gloriam, the form of adjuration appearing in the Greek without any ambiguity. It is therefore very rare and very difficult to find any ambiguity in the case of proper words, as far at least as Holy Scripture is concerned, which neither the context, showing the design of the writer, nor a comparison of translations, nor a reference to the original tongue, will suffice to

explain. Chapter 5 — It is a Wretched Slavery Which Takes the Figurative Expressions of Scripture in a Literal Sense. But the ambiguities of metaphorical words, about which I am next to speak, demand no ordinary care and diligence. In the first place, we must beware of taking a figurative expression literally. For the saying of the apostle applies in this case too: The letter kills, but the spirit gives life. 2 Corinthians 3:6 For when what is said figuratively is taken as if it were said literally, it is understood in a carnal manner. And nothing is more fittingly called the death of the soul than when that in it which raises it above the brutes, the intelligence namely, is put in subjection to the flesh by a blind adherence to the letter. For he who follows the letter takes figurative words as if they were proper, and does not carry out what is indicated by a proper word into its secondary signification; but, if he hears of the Sabbath, for example, thinks of nothing but the one day out of seven which recurs in constant succession; and when he hears of a sacrifice, does not carry his thoughts beyond the customary offerings of victims from the flock, and of the fruits of the earth. Now it is surely a miserable slavery of the soul to take signs for things, and to be unable to lift the eye of the mind above what is corporeal and created, that it may drink in eternal light. Chapter 6 — Utility of the Bondage of the Jews. This bondage, however, in the case of the Jewish people, differed widely from what it was in the case of the other nations; because, though the former were in bondage to temporal things, it was in such a way that in all these the One God was put before their minds. And although they paid attention to the signs of spiritual realities in place of the realities themselves, not knowing to what the signs referred, still they had this conviction rooted in their minds, that in subjecting themselves to such a bondage they were doing the pleasure of the one invisible God of all. And the apostle describes this bondage as being like to that of boys under the guidance of a schoolmaster.

And those who clung obstinately to such signs could not endure our Lord's neglect of them when the time for their revelation had come; and hence their leaders brought it as a charge against Him that He healed on the Sabbath, and the people, clinging to these signs as if they were realities, could not believe that one who refused to observe them in the way the Jews did was God, or came from God. But those who did believe, from among whom the first Church at Jerusalem was formed, showed clearly how great an advantage it had been to be so guided by the schoolmaster that signs, which had been for a season imposed on the obedient, fixed the thoughts of those who observed them on the worship of the One God who made heaven and earth. These men, because they had been very near to spiritual things (for even in the temporal and carnal offerings and types, though they did not clearly apprehend their spiritual meaning, they had learned to adore the One Eternal God,) were filled with such a measure of the Holy Spirit that they sold all their goods, and laid their price at the apostles' feet to be distributed among the needy, Acts 4:34-35 and consecrated themselves wholly to God as a new temple, of which the old temple they were serving was but the earthly type. Now it is not recorded that any of the Gentile churches did this, because men who had for their gods idols made with hands had not been so near to spiritual things. Chapter 7 — The Useless Bondage of the Gentiles. And if ever any of them endeavored to make it out that their idols were only signs, yet still they used them in reference to the worship and adoration of the creature. What difference does it make to me, for instance, that the image of Neptune is not itself to be considered a god, but only as representing the wide ocean, and all the other waters besides that spring out of fountains? As it is described by a poet of theirs, who says, if I recollect aright, You, Father Neptune, whose hoary temples are wreathed with the resounding sea, whose beard is the mighty ocean

flowing forth unceasingly, and whose hair is the winding rivers. This husk shakes its rattling stones within a sweet covering, and yet it is not food for men, but for swine. He who knows the gospel knows what I mean. Luke 15:16

What profit is it to me, then, that the image of Neptune is used with a reference to this explanation of it, unless indeed the result be that I worship neither? For any statue you like to take is as much god to me as the wide ocean. I grant, however, that they who make gods of the works of man have sunk lower than they who make gods of the works of God. But the command is that we should love and serve the One God, who is the Maker of all those things, the images of which are worshipped by the heathen either as gods, or as signs and representations of gods. If, then, to take a sign which has been established for a useful end instead of the thing itself which it was designed to signify, is bondage to the flesh, how much more so is it to take signs intended to represent useless things for the things themselves! For even if you go back to the very things signified by such signs, and engage your mind in the worship of these, you will not be anything the more free from the burden and the livery of bondage to the flesh.

Chapter 8 — The Jews Liberated from Their Bondage in One Way, the Gentiles in Another. Accordingly the liberty that comes by Christ took those whom it found under bondage to useful signs, and who were (so to speak) near to it, and, interpreting the signs to which they were in bondage, set them free by raising them to the realities of which these were signs. And out of such were formed the churches of the saints of Israel. Those, on the other hand, whom it found in bondage to useless signs, it not only freed from their slavery to such signs, but brought to nothing and cleared out of the way all these signs themselves, so that the Gentiles were turned from the corruption of a multitude of false gods, which Scripture frequently and justly speaks of as fornication, to the worship of the One God: not that

they might now fall into bondage to signs of a useful kind, but rather that they might exercise their minds in the spiritual understanding of such. Chapter 9 — Who is in Bondage to Signs, and Who Not. Now he is in bondage to a sign who uses, or pays homage to, any significant object without knowing what it signifies: he, on the other hand, who either uses or honors a useful sign divinely appointed, whose force and significance he understands, does not honor the sign which is seen and temporal, but that to which all such signs refer. Now such a man is spiritual and free even at the time of his bondage, when it is not yet expedient to reveal to carnal minds those signs by subjection to which their carnality is to be overcome. To this class of spiritual persons belonged the patriarchs and the prophets, and all those among the people of Israel through whose instrumentality the Holy Spirit ministered unto us the aids and consolations of the Scriptures. But at the present time, after that the proof of our liberty has shone forth so clearly in the resurrection of our Lord, we are not oppressed with the heavy burden of attending even to those signs which we now understand, but our Lord Himself, and apostolic practice, have handed down to us a few rites in place of many, and these at once very easy to perform, most majestic in their significance, and most sacred in the observance; such, for example, as the sacrament of baptism, and the celebration of the body and blood of the Lord. And as soon as any one looks upon these observances he knows to what they refer, and so reveres them not in carnal bondage, but in spiritual freedom. Now, as to follow the letter, and to take signs for the things that are signified by them, is a mark of weakness and bondage; so to interpret signs wrongly is the result of being misled by error. He, however, who does not understand what a sign signifies, but yet knows that it is a sign, is not in bondage. And it is better even to be in bondage to unknown but useful signs than, by interpreting them wrongly, to

draw the neck from under the yoke of bondage only to insert it in the coils of error. Chapter 10 — How We are to Discern Whether a Phrase is Figurative. But in addition to the foregoing rule, which guards us against taking a metaphorical form of speech as if it were literal, we must also pay heed to that which tells us not to take a literal form of speech as if it were figurative. In the first place, then, we must show the way to find out whether a phrase is literal or figurative. And the way is certainly as follows: Whatever there is in the word of God that cannot, when taken literally, be referred either to purity of life or soundness of doctrine, you may set down as figurative. Purity of life has reference to the love of God and one's neighbor; soundness of doctrine to the knowledge of God and one's neighbor. Every man, moreover, has hope in his own conscience, so far as he perceives that he has attained to the love and knowledge of God and his neighbor. Now all these matters have been spoken of in the first book. But as men are prone to estimate sins, not by reference to their inherent sinfulness, but rather by reference to their own customs, it frequently happens that a man will think nothing blameable except what the men of his own country and time are accustomed to condemn, and nothing worthy of praise or approval except what is sanctioned by the custom of his companions; and thus it comes to pass, that if Scripture either enjoins what is opposed to the customs of the hearers, or condemns what is not so opposed, and if at the same time the authority of the word has a hold upon their minds, they think that the expression is figurative. Now Scripture enjoins nothing except charity, and condemns nothing except lust, and in that way fashions the lives of men. In the same way, if an erroneous opinion has taken possession of the mind, men think that whatever Scripture asserts contrary to this must be figurative. Now Scripture asserts nothing but the Universal faith, in regard to things past, future, and present. It is a narrative of the

past, a prophecy of the future, and a description of the present. But all these tend to nourish and strengthen charity, and to overcome and root out lust. I mean by charity that affection of the mind which aims at the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one's self and one's neighbor in subordination to God; by lust I mean that affection of the mind which aims at enjoying one's self and one's neighbor, and other corporeal things, without reference to God. Again, what lust, when unsubdued, does towards corrupting one's own soul and body, is called vice; but what it does to injure another is called crime. And these are the two classes into which all sins may be divided. But the vices come first; for when these have exhausted the soul, and reduced it to a kind of poverty, it easily slides into crimes, in order to remove hindrances to, or to find assistance in, its vices. In the same way, what charity does with a view to one's own advantage is prudence; but what it does with a view to a neighbor's advantage is called benevolence. And here prudence comes first; because no one can confer an advantage on another which he does not himself possess. Now in proportion as the dominion of lust is pulled down, in the same proportion is that of charity built up. Chapter 11 — Rule for Interpreting Phrases Which Seem to Ascribe Severity to God and the Saints. Every severity, therefore, and apparent cruelty, either in word or deed, that is ascribed in Holy Scripture to God or His saints, avails to the pulling down of the dominion of lust. And if its meaning be clear, we are not to give it some secondary reference, as if it were spoken figuratively. Take, for example, that saying of the apostle: But, after your hardness and impenitent heart, treasurest up unto yourself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God; who will render to every man according to his deeds: to them who, by patient continuance in well-doing, seek for glory, and honor, and immortality, eternal life; but unto them that are

contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that does evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile. Romans 2:5-9 But this is addressed to those who, being unwilling to subdue their lust, are themselves involved in the destruction of their lust. When, however, the dominion of lust is overturned in a man over whom it had held sway, this plain expression is used: They that are Christ's have crucified the flesh, with the affections and lusts. Galatians 5:24 Only that, even in these instances, some words are used figuratively, as for example, the wrath of God and crucified. But these are not so numerous, nor placed in such a way as to obscure the sense, and make it allegorical or enigmatical, which is the kind of expression properly called figurative. But in the saying addressed to Jeremiah, See, I have this day set you over the nations, and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, Jeremiah 1:10 there is no doubt the whole of the language is figurative, and to be referred to the end I have spoken of.

Chapter 12 — Rule for Interpreting Those Sayings and Actions Which are Ascribed to God and the Saints, and Which Yet Seem to the Unskillful to Be Wicked. Those things, again, whether only sayings or whether actual deeds, which appear to the inexperienced to be sinful, and which are ascribed to God, or to men whose holiness is put before us as an example, are wholly figurative, and the hidden kernel of meaning they contain is to be picked out as food for the nourishment of charity. Now, whoever uses transitory objects less freely than is the custom of those among whom he lives, is either temperate or superstitious; whoever, on the other hand, uses them so as to transgress the bounds of the custom of the good men about him, either has a further meaning in what he does, or is sinful. In all such matters it is not the use of the objects, but the lust of the user, that is to blame. Nobody in his sober senses

would believe, for example, that when our Lord's feet were anointed by the woman with precious ointment, John 12:3 it was for the same purpose for which luxurious and profligate men are accustomed to have theirs anointed in those banquets which we abhor. For the sweet odor means the good report which is earned by a life of good works; and the man who wins this, while following in the footsteps of Christ, anoints His feet (so to speak) with the most precious ointment. And so that which in the case of other persons is often a sin, becomes, when ascribed to God or a prophet, the sign of some great truth. Keeping company with a harlot, for example, is one thing when it is the result of abandoned manners, another thing when done in the course of his prophecy by the prophet Hosea. Hosea 1:2 Because it is a shamefully wicked thing to strip the body naked at a banquet among the drunken and licentious, it does not follow that it is a sin to be naked in the baths. We must, therefore, consider carefully what is suitable to times and places and persons, and not rashly charge men with sins. For it is possible that a wise man may use the daintiest food without any sin of epicurism or gluttony, while a fool will crave for the vilest food with a most disgusting eagerness of appetite. And any sane man would prefer eating fish after the manner of our Lord, to eating lentiles after the manner of Esau, or barley after the manner of oxen. For there are several beasts that feed on commoner kinds of food, but it does not follow that they are more temperate than we are. For in all matters of this kind it is not the nature of the things we use, but our reason for using them, and our manner of seeking them, that make what we do either praiseworthy or blameable. Now the saints of ancient times were, under the form of an earthly kingdom, foreshadowing and foretelling the kingdom of heaven. And on account of the necessity for a numerous offspring, the custom of one man having several wives was at that time blameless: and for the same reason it was not

proper for one woman to have several husbands, because a woman does not in that way become more fruitful, but, on the contrary, it is base harlotry to seek either gain or offspring by promiscuous intercourse. In regard to matters of this sort, whatever the holy men of those times did without lust, Scripture passes over without blame, although they did things which could not be done at the present time, except through lust. And everything of this nature that is there narrated we are to take not only in its historical and literal, but also in its figurative and prophetic sense, and to interpret as bearing ultimately upon the end of love towards God or our neighbor, or both. For as it was disgraceful among the ancient Romans to wear tunics reaching to the heels, and furnished with sleeves, but now it is disgraceful for men honorably born not to wear tunics of that description: so we must take heed in regard to other things also, that lust do not mix with our use of them; for lust not only abuses to wicked ends the customs of those among whom we live, but frequently also transgressing the bounds of custom, betrays, in a disgraceful outbreak, its own hideousness, which was concealed under the cover of prevailing fashions. Chapter 13 — Same Subject, Continued. Whatever, then, is in accordance with the habits of those with whom we are either compelled by necessity, or undertake as a matter of duty, to spend this life, is to be turned by good and great men to some prudent or benevolent end, either directly, as is our duty, or figuratively, as is allowable to prophets. Chapter 14 — Error of Those Who Think that There is No Absolute Right and Wrong. But when men unacquainted with other modes of life than their own meet with the record of such actions, unless they are restrained by authority, they look upon them as sins, and do not consider that their own customs either in regard to marriage, or feasts, or dress, or the other necessities and adornments of human life, appear sinful to the people of other nations and

other times. And, distracted by this endless variety of customs, some who were half asleep (as I may say)— that is, who were neither sunk in the deep sleep of folly, nor were able to awake into the light of wisdom — have thought that there was no such thing as absolute right, but that every nation took its own custom for right; and that, since every nation has a different custom, and right must remain unchangeable, it becomes manifest that there is no such thing as right at all. Such men did not perceive, to take only one example, that the precept, Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them, cannot be altered by any diversity of national customs. And this precept, when it is referred to the love of God, destroys all vices when to the love of one's neighbor, puts an end to all crimes. For no one is willing to defile his own dwelling; he ought not, therefore, to defile the dwelling of God, that is, himself. And no one wishes an injury to be done him by another; he himself, therefore, ought not to do injury to another. Chapter 15 — Rule for Interpreting Figurative Expressions. The tyranny of lust being thus overthrown, charity reigns through its supremely just laws of love to God for His own sake, and love to one's self and one's neighbor for God's sake. Accordingly, in regard to figurative expressions, a rule such as the following will be observed, to carefully turn over in our minds and meditate upon what we read till an interpretation be found that tends to establish the reign of love. Now, if when taken literally it at once gives a meaning of this kind, the expression is not to be considered figurative. Chapter 16 — Rule for Interpreting Commands and Prohibitions. If the sentence is one of command, either forbidding a crime or vice, or enjoining an act of prudence or benevolence, it is not figurative. If, however, it seems to enjoin a crime or vice, or to forbid an act of prudence or benevolence, it is figurative. Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man, says Christ, and drink His blood, you have no life in you. John

6:53 This seems to enjoin a crime or a vice; it is therefore a figure, enjoining that we should have a share [communicandem] in the sufferings of our Lord, and that we should retain a sweet and profitable memory [in memoria] of the fact that His flesh was wounded and crucified for us. Scripture says: If your enemy hungers, feed him; if he thirsts, give him drink; and this is beyond doubt a command to do a kindness. But in what follows, for in so doing you shall heap coals of fire on his head, one would think a deed of malevolence was enjoined. Do not doubt, then, that the expression is figurative; and, while it is possible to interpret it in two ways, one pointing to the doing of an injury, the other to a display of superiority, let charity on the contrary call you back to benevolence, and interpret the coals of fire as the burning groans of penitence by which a man's pride is cured who bewails that he has been the enemy of one who came to his assistance in distress. In the same way, when our Lord says, He who loves his life shall lose it, we are not to think that He forbids the prudence with which it is a man's duty to care for his life, but that He says in a figurative sense, Let him lose his life — that is, let him destroy and lose that perverted and unnatural use which he now makes of his life, and through which his desires are fixed on temporal things so that he gives no heed to eternal. It is written: Give to the godly man, and help not a sinner. The latter clause of this sentence seems to forbid benevolence; for it says, help not a sinner. Understand, therefore, that sinner is put figuratively for sin, so that it is his sin you are not to help. Chapter 17 — Some Commands are Given to All in Common, Others to Particular Classes. Again, it often happens that a man who has attained, or thinks he has attained, to a higher grade of spiritual life, thinks that the commands given to those who are still in the lower grades are figurative; for example, if he has embraced a life of celibacy and made himself a eunuch for the kingdom of

heaven's sake, he contends that the commands given in Scripture about loving and ruling a wife are not to be taken literally, but figuratively; and if he has determined to keep his virgin unmarried, he tries to put a figurative interpretation on the passage where it is said, Marry your daughter, and so shall you have performed a weighty matter. Sirach 7:27 Accordingly, another of our rules for understanding the Scriptures will be as follows — to recognize that some commands are given to all in common, others to particular classes of persons, that the medicine may act not only upon the state of health as a whole, but also upon the special weakness of each member. For that which cannot be raised to a higher state must be cared for in its own state.

