

KINGDOM. SUPPLEMENT 8

[THE PARABLES OF JESUS] THE DEFENDANT

The parable of the defendant in Matthew 5:25-26 is a parable about FORGIVENESS IN GOD'S KINGDOM.

Read Matthew 5:25-26.

1. Understand the natural story of the parable.

Discuss. What are the true-to-life elements of the story?

Notes. Some people do not regard this as a parable. However, it is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It uses an ordinary court procedure to illustrate a spiritual message. The story of a known procedure in a worldly court case is told in terms of an exhortation.

2. Examine the immediate context and determine the elements of the parable.

Discover and discuss. What is the setting, the story and the explanation or application of the parable?

Notes.

(1) The setting of the parable is contained in Matthew 5:21-24.

It consists of two parts:

Matthew 5:21-22 deals with the interpretation of the sixth commandment. Interpreters differ about the translation of the dative case in Matthew 5:21. Some translate, "It was said to the people long ago". This means that Moses in the law said something to the fathers of Israel and that Jesus assumed a tone of superiority over the Mosaic regulations. Others translate, "It was said by the people long ago", meaning that the ancient interpreters of the law (the rabbi's) had said something, and that Jesus disagreed with what they said or considered it dangerously incomplete.

The second translation is correct for the following reasons. Jesus would not first affirm the law in Matthew 5:17 and then set it aside in Matthew 5:21. If Jesus had been referring to what Moses commanded in the law, he would have used different words like "Moses commanded" or "It is written" (Matthew 4:4,7,10). Later Jewish writings use the phrase "the fathers of antiquity" to refer to their former teachers, the rabbis Hillel and Shammai. And the words "It was said" is more readily associated with the oral tradition of such teachers than the written words in the Old Testament. The conclusion is that "the men of long ago" were those people who had orally interpreted the written Old Testament. Their summary of the letter of the law was not incorrect, but the teaching of Jesus shows that those ancient rabbis misplaced the emphasis, just as the Pharisees and teachers of the law were still doing in the days of Jesus.

The ancient interpreters of the sixth commandment quoted the letter of the sixth commandment correctly, "Do not murder" (Exodus 20:13). Also the substance of the words, which they added, "Anyone who murders will be subject to punishment", can be found in the Old Testament (Genesis 9:6). In the present context, however, what was wrong was not what they had said, but what they had left unsaid, what they had not interpreted and what they had failed to emphasise! The ancient interpreters as well as the interpreters of the Old Testament in Jesus' day were not giving a complete summary of the sixth commandment. They only applied *the letter of the law*, but ignored *the deeper underlying spirit of the law*! They would say something like, "Be careful when you use a gun, or knife, or drugs, because you might kill someone."

Jesus teaches, as long as these interpreters only emphasise the letter of the law, but fail to warn people against the spiritual cause that produces such violence (murder), then they have made the law of God nothing more than a penal code in human society. Jesus teaches that the Ten Commandments of God are much more than a penal code. The Ten Commandments go way beyond the outward acts of the transgressions and apply to the root causes of these outward transgressions, namely, to the sinful attitudes of the heart, which underlie these outward sinful acts! The outward action of murder always begins with the inner attitude of the sinful heart. Man generally only looks at *the surface problem*. God always looks at *the root cause*! For example, bitter words out of the mouth are the expressions of anger, hatred and an unforgiving spirit in the heart!

"Raca" (an Aramaic term of contempt), which means "Empty head", expresses contempt for that person in the heart.

"Fool" or "Idiot" expresses anger, hatred and bitterness against a person in the heart. Jesus does not give any gradation of these sins, but makes only one point. Whoever harbours unresolved anger, hatred and bitterness in his heart against anyone else, "is in danger of being thrown into hell", that is, deserves the death sentence from God! The lesson that Jesus teaches is that sinful anger, hatred and bitterness in the heart leads to bitter words. And bitter words are in essence "murder" taking place in the heart! Unless a person repents from this, he will be condemned to hell. Jesus teaches that

the root of sin and all evil lies in the heart of man. It is in the heart of man, where hatred and indifference must be replaced by love, and hypocrisy and selfishness must be replaced by sincerity.

Matthew 5:23-24 is the application of the sixth commandment. Some people might think, as long as they exercise self-control and do not express these sinful attitudes in their heart by *speaking* angry and bitter words, they have kept the sixth commandment. But Jesus teaches that any kind of relationship, where reconciliation has not taken place, is a violation of the sixth commandment. As long as a person does not live in harmony with his brother or sister, he is breaking the sixth commandment and cannot worship God. Even if that person outwardly worships God, God will not meet or fellowship with that person! A strained relationship with any human being causes a strained relationship with God! 1 John 4:20 says, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen."

When Jesus says, "If you remember that your brother has something against you", then he means that the offence must be of a nature important enough to be called "a grievance". He does not only refer to righteous grievances, but to any grievance. Jesus does not even mention the kind of grievance. He places all the emphasis on the need to be reconciled and to live in harmony with one's brothers. Whenever you know that your brother even thinks that he has a right to be dissatisfied with you, you should strive to get reconciled to him!

Jesus' positive application of the sixth commandment is that the heart must at all times be filled with love, and not with anger, hatred or bitterness. He teaches that as long as you do not get reconciled with your brother or sister, you cannot please God. It is in this setting, that Jesus told the parable of the defendant.

(2) The story of the parable is contained in the form of an exhortation in Matthew 5:25-26.

(3) The explanation or application of the parable is the exhortation itself contained in Matthew 5:25-26.

A person must settle a dispute with his adversary quickly. He must quickly try and get reconciled to a person who *thinks* or *feels* that he has been offended. He must do this immediately, because the offended brother or opponent may be contemplating legal proceedings, or may even have started such proceedings. Again Jesus does not say whether or not the opponent is morally right. He also does not state the nature of the offence, although it might point in the direction of a financial debt (Matthew 5:26). He places the emphasis, not on justice (proving that you are right), but on getting reconciled (with your opponent, regardless who was right)! The question of justice is not discussed in this passage, even if it will ultimately be dealt with in the final judgement.

A person must make every attempt to settle the matter "out of court", while he still has the opportunity to do so. He must try to get reconciled with his opponent under four eyes, without the involvement of the court in the world. If he fails to do this, he might be thrown in jail until he has paid every bit of his debt.

3. Identify the relevant and irrelevant details of the parable.

Discuss. Which of the details in this parable are really essential or relevant?

Notes.

Jesus does not give any of the details in this parable any particular meaning. However, the context shows that in the final analysis, Jesus is not speaking about an earthly but a heavenly Judge (Matthew 6:15). He is not speaking about an earthly jail, but about hell (Matthew 5:22; 18:30,35). It is the inward attitude of the heart that must be one of love towards all other people. Jesus warns that if a person dies with anger, hatred and bitterness in his heart against another person, then that attitude will testify against him before the heavenly Judge in the final judgement and he will not escape from the prison of hell. Jesus implies that the genuine people of God's kingdom do not continue to harbour anger, hatred or bitterness towards other people in their hearts.

4. Identify the main message of the parable.

Discuss. What is the main message of this parable?

Notes.

The parable of the defendant in Matthew 5:25-26 is about "forgiveness in God's kingdom".

The main message of the parable is the following. "The time for reconciliation is always now!"

Forgiveness is one of the fundamental characteristics of God's kingdom. The genuine people of God's kingdom do not postpone reconciliation with a brother or sister with whom they are angry or who is angry with them, because "tomorrow" may be too late! The person, who refuses to make an earnest attempt at reconciliation, will never be able to pay his debt.

5. Compare the parable with parallel and contrasting passages in the Bible.

(1) The letter of the law and the spirit of the law.

Read Genesis 4:6-7; Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18; Proverbs 14:17; 22:24-25; Job 5:2.

Discover and discuss. What does the Bible teach about the root of evil?

Notes. The root of evil lies in the heart. Not the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law uncovers the sinful nature and attitudes of man. The ancient and modern Jewish interpreters had no excuse to limit their interpretation of the sixth commandment only to *the outward act* of murder.

During the first domestic quarrel, God had said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.” God was referring to the inner attitude in Cain’s heart, namely jealousy and anger.

In the Old Testament, God already summarised the Ten Commandments with, “Love God” and “Love your neighbour”. It is love that must determine both the inner attitudes of the heart as well as the outward conduct of man. Anger causes a person to do foolish things and resentment (hatred) kills.

(2) Unacceptable sacrifices and acceptable sacrifices.

Read Genesis 4:5; 1 Samuel 15:22-23; Isaiah 1:10-17; Jeremiah 6:19-20; Amos 5:22-24; Micah 6:6-8;

Mark 12:41-44; Hebrews 11:4.

Discover and discuss. What does the Bible teach about sacrifices and offerings that are not acceptable to God?

Notes. Sacrifices and offerings, which are brought to God, while the heart of man continues to harbour sin and injustice, are totally worthless in God’s eyes. God rejects such sacrifices and offerings! Being very “religious”: like holding to the confession of one God, fasting two times a week, praying three times every day, going on three pilgrim journeys every year to Jerusalem and giving a tenth of your income to God and the poor, is absolutely worthless in the eyes of the God of the Bible when you harbour hatred in your heart against anyone or when you are engaged in a so-called “holy war”¹.

(3) The time for reconciliation is now.

Discover and discuss. How does what each of these passages teach, compare to what the parable teaches?

Notes.

- **Read** Romans 12:18. When you have done all in your power to bring about reconciliation with your opponent, and he still refuses to be fair, and where necessary to be forgiving, the guilt rests entirely and alone on your opponent.
 - **Read** Proverbs 27:1; Luke 4:18-19 compared with Isaiah 61:2; 2 Corinthians 6:2. God warns again and again against procrastination! Do not put off any important decision till tomorrow, because tomorrow may be too late! The time for important decisions, like conversion, faith and reconciliation with another brother or sister is always NOW!
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¹ Holy war = jihad.