

KINGDOM. SUPPLEMENT 7

[THE PARABLES OF JESUS] THE RETURN OF AN EVIL SPIRIT and THE TWO DEBTORS

The parable of the return of an evil spirit in Matthew 12:43-45 and the parable of the two debtors in Luke 7:40-50 are parables about **OUTGOING LOVE IN GOD'S KINGDOM.**

A. THE RETURN OF AN EVIL SPIRIT

Read Matthew 12:43-45.

1. Understand the natural story of the parable.

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

Notes. In the experience of some people, the elements of this story are not true-to-life. This is because they do not believe that Satan or evil spirits exist and therefore do not recognise the work of Satan or his evil spirits. They do not yet realise that particular (not all) events in their lives are caused by evil spirits. Nevertheless, during the time of Jesus and in many societies today, people generally believed in the existence of evil spirits and see their destructive work. They have seen how Jesus cast the evil spirits out from people or how evil spirits are cast out today! To them, the story of this parable is not strange, superstitious or culturally determined.

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 12:22-42.

It includes the following:

The sign of Satan's doom. Matthew 12:22-37 deals with the question whether Christ's miracles are a sign or proof of Satan's dominion (lordship, sovereignty, control) or of his defeat (doom)? The setting is the growing opposition of the Pharisees and teachers of the law against Jesus and his ministry. They criticised Jesus for doing things that were unlawful on the Sabbath and had already plotted to kill him (Matthew 12:2,7,10,14). They had seen how Jesus had healed a demon-possessed man, who was blind and mute (Matthew 12:22-23). Now the Pharisees and teachers of the law openly blasphemed Jesus by saying that he was casting out evil spirits through the power of Satan (Beelzebul or Beelzebub).

However, Jesus answered them that when he casts out evil spirits by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God had come upon them. Jesus taught that his miracles of healing and of casting out evil spirits were signs of the defeat (doom) of Satan and his evil spirits (not signs of the dominion of Satan or his evil spirits)! They are signs and proof of the reality and presence of God's kingdom (kingship, sovereign rule) on earth! Jesus taught that the tying up of Satan and the casting out of his demons was a sign that God's kingdom had come on earth at his first coming!

The sign of Jonah. In Matthew 12:38-42, Jesus rebuked the craving of the Jewish religious leaders for miraculous signs. In spite of the fact that Jesus performed many miracles of healing in their midst, these Pharisees and teachers of the law rejected these signs as merely *earthly signs performed through the power of the devil*. What they demanded to see was some *heavenly sign performed through the power of God*, as Elijah made fire to descend from heaven, so that Jesus could prove he really was the Messiah (Matthew 16:1). These religious leaders of Israel together with their followers were not really interested in the healing and salvation of people, but only in sensational events and thrilling performances.

The only sign, which Jesus Christ would give them, would be the sign of Jonah. The sign of Jonah was a type (an event serving as an illustration) of the death and resurrection of the Jesus Christ. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the only sign for a generation that craves for sensational signs!

The sign of a religion of negatives. The kind of religion, which the Pharisees and teachers of the law advocated, was emphatically "a religion of negatives". They did not stress the positive, but rather all the negative aspects of the Old Testament law. They taught people,

- "Do not associate with tax collectors and sinners",
- "Do not break the Sabbath by picking the heads of grain or by healing sick people",
- "Do not break an oath which you have sworn to God", etc.

Think of the many "do not" do this or that which religious leaders demand in our day.

Negative laws of modern people:

- *Do not* eat certain foods (for example: pork)
- *Do not* drink alcohol
- *Do not* smoke
- *Do not* dance
- *Do not* sing during religious meetings
- *Do not* say that God revealed himself in a human being (for example: Jesus Christ) (even when he has revealed himself in a burning bush) (Exodus 3:1-6)
- *Do not* question the claim that a particular Book had descended from heaven
- *Do not* question the belief that a particular human being claims to be a prophet or that he speaks the truth
- *Do not* associate with people from a different religion than your own, etc.

Negative laws for men:

- *Do not* shave your beards
- *Do not* go outside without some covering on your head

Negative laws for women:

- *Do not* worship without a hat or some covering on your head
- *Do not* appear in public without a veil
- *Do not* appear recognizable in public
- *Do not* speak about God to men
- *Do not* speak to men

The Jewish religious teachers had a list of 365 prohibitions (besides a list of 248 commands) which all their followers were required to obey! There are therefore 365 “do nots” in their religion!

It was in this context of this negative religion of the Jews that Jesus Christ told “the parable of the return of an evil spirit”.

(2) The story of the parable is contained in Matthew 12:43-45a.

(3) The explanation or application of the parable is contained in Matthew 12:45b.

Jesus said, “That is how it will be with this wicked generation!” What he said about the clean but empty house was applicable to this wicked generation, that is, the nation of Israel (and to man-made religions today), who did not recognise or believe that Jesus was their Messiah.

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

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

Notes.

The man. Jesus does not assign any specific meaning to any of the details in this parable. He only compares the condition of the man who was possessed initially, then liberated and finally again possessed by eight evil spirits with this generation (this generation of religious people)(Matthew 12:45). The meaning of the whole parable must be interpreted in the light of this statement.

The evil spirit. Jesus does not intend to teach a course on demonology. He wants us not so much to think of evil spirits as he wants us to think of “this wicked generation” (Matthew 12:39,45) that resembles a man possessed by eight demons. Thus, “the evil spirits” do not represent anything else and is not a relevant detail in this parable.

The arid places. Just like the good angels are associated with order, beauty and fullness of life, so the evil angels or evil spirits are associated with disorder, desolation and death. These waterless places or deserts have no relevant meaning, but only enhance the story.

Possessed by one evil spirit, then liberated and finally again possessed by eight evil spirits. This is an essential and relevant detail, because it describes the condition of this evil generation! The meaning of this parable can only be deduced from the context.

The early ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus in Israel was like setting a man free from an evil spirit. John preached the need for repentance and producing fruit in keeping with repentance. He gained many followers (Matthew 3:5). Also Jesus Christ called people to repent, because he said that the kingdom of God had come near (Matthew 4:17). He too gained very many followers (Matthew 4:23-25). What happened in Israel through the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus seemed as if an evil spirit had been driven out of a man – “the man” represented the nation of Israel in the days of Jesus.

But under the influence of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, the condition of Israel was rapidly changing. More and more of the followers of the Pharisees and teachers of the law opposed Jesus Christ. The religious leaders openly criticised, accused and reviled Jesus Christ (Matthew 12:2,7,10,14,24). They even plotted to kill him. Finally, they and their followers shouted “Crucify him! Crucify him!” (Matthew 26:59; 27:1,20,41). What was now happening in Israel

seemed as if eight evil spirits in the man had replaced the one evil spirit. “The man” still represents the nation of Israel, which Jesus calls “this evil generation”! By opposing and rejecting Jesus Christ, the condition of Israel only became worse!

4. Identify the main message of the parable.

Discuss. What is the main message of this parable?

Notes.

The parable of the return of an evil spirit in Matthew 12:43-45 teaches about “outgoing love in God’s kingdom.”

The main message of this parable is the following. “God’s kingdom is characterised by a positive religion instead of a negative religion. It is characterised by positive outgoing love instead of negative in-grown religion (with a list of negative laws and rules).” It is characterised by the outgoing love of Jesus Christ towards people that need healing, liberation and salvation (Matthew 12:9-14), instead of the legalistic passivity (Matthew 12:2), atmosphere of condemnation (Matthew 12:7), negative criticism (Matthew 12:24) and fanaticism with outward signs (Matthew 12:39) in the Jewish religion.

Outgoing love is one of the outstanding characteristics of God’s kingdom! Outgoing love is the persistent devotion to do what is right and good instead of the continual fear of doing what is wrong and bad! The genuine people of God’s kingdom are like an occupied house, bustling with positive activities instead of an empty and sterile house (Matthew 12:44). The occupants are healed, liberated and saved by God’s grace through faith and express their gratitude in active love, righteousness and holiness and not in passive harmlessness!

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

Read Matthew 15:13; 21:19; 25:18,26-28; 25:41-46.

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

Notes. Jesus is not satisfied with merely a clean but empty house that represents a negative, passive and harmless religion (a religion that is upheld by a long list of laws or rules).

Neither is God satisfied with a person who is only planted and developed (taught and trained) by human hands (Matthew 15:13). The action of Jesus shows that a fig tree that only bears a lot of leaves and no fruit is in danger of being cursed (Matthew 21:19). And Jesus teaches that a person, who hides his God-given talents and responsibilities, is in danger of being rejected (Matthew 25:18,26-28). A person who thinks that he is a Christian but does not care for other needy Christians is in danger of not inheriting God’s kingdom (Matthew 25:41-46).

All these passages teach that Jesus condemns a passive religion controlled by human laws or rules of “do not’s”. Instead he commends and urges people towards an active service of love. People like the Pharisees emphasise, “Do not do this and do not do that!” But Jesus emphasises “Do this and do that! (And you will live)” Negative religions try to lord it over people by fear of transgressing the traditional laws and rules. But Jesus Christ sets people free to love God, love their neighbour and love themselves.

6. Summarise the main teachings of the parable.

Discuss. What is the main teaching or message of this parable? What did Jesus Christ teach us to *know* or to *believe* and what did he teach us to *be* or to *do*?

Notes.

(1) Outgoing love or the persistent devotion to do what is right instead of the continual fear of doing what is wrong.

This is one of the outstanding characteristics of God’s kingdom! The condition of Israel during the days of John the Baptist’s ministry was like a man set free from an evil spirit. People had repented and were expecting the Messiah, but had not actually received the Messiah. That was in itself not enough! The soul of Israel was, as it were, empty, unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. But such a condition can and will never satisfy the deepest needs of the human heart and also not the requirements of God.

(2) Harmlessness is not the same as holiness! Legalistic passiveness is not the same as outgoing love!

People often turn over a new page, try to better their lives or clean up the mess in their lives. But Jesus Christ provides much more than an empty and clean house! People often develop their own personalities and character, attend seminars, courses or training conferences to develop their personalities and skills and do all kinds of good works in order to become a better person.

But Jesus teaches that in order to really change inwardly in character and outwardly in behaviour, a person must be a plant planted by God (Matthew 15:13), regenerated and transformed by God (John 3:7)!

People are often impressed by outward etiquette, good behaviour, religious ceremonies and obligatory religious behaviour. Jesus likens this with an empty and tidied house! But Jesus Christ teaches that true Christians must not merely have tidied hearts and lives. They must have cleansed hearts (by the blood of Jesus) and occupied hearts (by the Holy Spirit)!

(3) Also some other parables teach the danger of outward show instead of inward reality.

People that look like a tree with many leaves but no fruit and people who possess talents which they have buried are compared to an empty, clean swept and tidied house. Their outward behaviour seems to indicate a change, but Jesus looks at the heart that is occupied by the Holy Spirit and full of outgoing love (Romans 5:5).

(4) The kingdom of God is characterised by the positive religion of Jesus Christ instead of the negative religion of the Jewish religious leaders and teachers.

While the Pharisees taught, “Don’t do this!” Jesus taught, “Do this!” He taught “Love God!” and “Love your neighbour!” The warm kind attitude of Jesus clashed with the cold legalistic attitude of the Pharisees. His broadmindedness clashed with their narrow clan spirit. His outgoing love clashed with their selfishness. His emphasis on the deeper meaning of the law clashed with their insistence on keeping the letter of the law (Matthew 5:17-48). The big-hearted Jesus Christ and the bigoted Pharisees could not dwell together! That is why Jesus said, “I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20).”

B. THE TWO DEBTORS

Read Luke 7:40-50.

1. Understand the natural story of the parable.

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

Notes. The story about two men owing money to a moneylender is a reality everyone knows. Five hundred denarii was an amount equal to what a common labourer would earn during a period of about two years and fifty denarii an amount for which such a labourer would have to work about two months. These are large amounts of money. Neither of them was able to pay. Instead of throwing them in jail until they had paid everything, the moneylender generously cancelled their debts.

Jesus concluded this parable with a question, in order to make his hearers think about the main message. He asked, “Which of these two men would love the moneylender more?” Simon answered correctly, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt cancelled.”

Then Jesus made the application and compared the woman who had anointed his feet with the Pharisee who had invited him for dinner, “Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven - for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.”

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 Luke 7:36-39.

The Pharisee. Jesus was invited by a Pharisee to eat with him. Why he invited Jesus is not clear. It is possible that he had heard that Jesus was a great prophet and had invited him out of curiosity (Luke 7:16). It is also possible that he wanted to have an opportunity to find a reason to accuse Jesus (Luke 6:7). He did not invite Jesus out of love or even high regard for Jesus, as is clear from the treatment he gave Jesus (Luke 7:44-46). Nevertheless, Jesus accepted his invitation. Jesus not only ate with tax collectors and sinners (Luke 5:29-30), he also ate with Pharisees (Luke 7:36; 11:37; 14:1).

The woman. In Israel, it was not unusual for uninvited persons to enter a home in which a dinner was given. They would generally seat themselves along the wall, observe everything that was happening and even engaged some of the invited guests in conversation.

A certain well-known woman of bad reputation also came into the house where they were eating and stood at Jesus’ feet. It would be unfair to say that she was a prostitute, because a woman could be a sinner without being a prostitute. Besides, it is clear from the present description that she was no longer living her former life. Before this day, she must have heard Jesus preaching the gospel and believed the gospel, because her whole behaviour testified of her gratefulness towards Jesus. In her heart there was a growing sense of having been forgiven by God! That is why she brought an expensive offering of thanksgiving to him who had been instrumental in changing her life.

The woman's act of gratefulness. Overwhelmed with genuine sorrow for her past sinful life, she burst out into tears and her tears flowed down on Jesus' feet. She dried his feet with her hair, kissed them, and poured perfume upon them. Simon, the Pharisee, regarded all this as offensive and concluded in his heart that Jesus could not be a prophet, because he would have known that she was a woman of bad reputation and would not have permitted her to touch him. In response to the attitude and thoughts of this Pharisee, Jesus told this parable.

(2) The story of the parable is contained in Luke 7:41-42.

(3) The explanation or application of the parable is contained in Luke 7:43-50.

In the presence of everyone in the house, Jesus exposes the shabby treatment he had received from his host, the Pharisee. His host had not received Jesus with the customary Eastern evidences of hospitality. He had not provided Jesus with water to wash his feet, after he had walked on the dusty roads (Genesis 18:4; Judges 19:21). He had not welcomed him by means of a kiss, which was an expression of affection (Genesis 29:13; 45:15; Romans 16:16; 1 Peter 5:14). He had not anointed his guest's head, not even with cheap olive oil, which was a symbol of joy (Psalm 23:5; 45:7; 141:5). In short, the Pharisees' treatment of Jesus was cold, patronising and discourteous.

Jesus also says that he received the very opposite treatment from the woman. Instead of water, she used her tears to wash his feet. This was a sign of her repentance and conversion. Instead of a kiss upon his cheek, she had planted kisses all over his feet. And her kisses were symbols of humble gratitude. Instead of cheap olive oil for his head, she had poured precious and fragrant perfume on his feet!

Jesus then said, "Her many sins have been forgiven - for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little." This application by Jesus has the following meaning: The Pharisee did not believe the gospel. He did not believe that he was a sinner; therefore he felt no need for forgiveness; and therefore he expressed no gratitude! He showed his lack of faith by his lack of love towards Jesus.

In contrast, the woman believed the gospel (Luke 7:50). She had been overwhelmed by her sins and these were now all forgiven! Her faith in the message of Jesus gave her the awareness of complete forgiveness of sins. And she showed her conviction that she was forgiven by the love she expressed towards Jesus. Jesus confirmed what she already knew in principle and experienced in her heart by saying, "Your sins are forgiven. ... Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Luke 7:48-50). Romans 5:1 says, "Everyone who has been justified through faith, has peace with God through Jesus Christ." This woman had faith and therefore she had peace with God and showed her love to Jesus Christ! Contrast this with Isaiah 57:20-21, "There is no peace," says my God, "for the wicked."

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

Teach. Jesus does not give particular meaning to any of the details of the story.

4. Identify the main message of the parable.

Discuss. What is the main message of this parable?

Notes.

The parable of the two debtors in Luke 7:40-50 teaches about "outgoing love in God's kingdom".

The main message of the parable is the following. "The outpouring of love results from the sense of having been forgiven and the consciousness of having been forgiven is the result of faith in the gospel." The person, who is forgiven much, shows much love. And the person, who is forgiven little, shows little love.

The outpouring of love towards Jesus is one of the main characteristics of God's kingdom! The genuine people of God's kingdom, whose sins have been forgiven, no matter how many they were, express their gratefulness to God in an outpouring of love towards Jesus Christ!

Jesus contrasts the Pharisee's lack of a sense of forgiveness with the woman's sense of forgiveness. The Pharisee thought that he was righteous and felt no need for any forgiveness at all. Because he had been forgiven nothing, he loved nothing. Because he had not received any forgiveness from Jesus Christ, he also did not love Jesus Christ.

In contrast, the woman was deeply conscious of her sins (sinful nature) and at the same time of her complete forgiveness. Because she had received much forgiveness from Jesus, she loved Jesus Christ much.

In this parable the contrast is between a man who had been forgiven little and a woman who had been forgiven much! Among Christians there is no contrast between being forgiven little or being forgiven much. When God *forgives* someone completely he declares that person 100% righteous (forgiven) in his eyes and continues to regard and treat him as 100% righteous (forgiven) throughout his life (cf. Romans 4:4-8)! All Christians, who have repented of their sins and believe in Jesus Christ, are completely forgiven (Hebrews 8:12)!

As Christians grow in their spiritual lives, they also grow *in their awareness* of their sinful nature, *in their awareness* of all Jesus Christ has done for them and *in their awareness* of how much he has forgiven them. Consequently Christians also grow in their love for Jesus Christ. An older Christian is often much more aware of his sinful nature than a young

Christian. The more a person is aware of his sinful nature, the more is his need to be aware that he is completely forgiven. And the more he is aware of his being completely forgiven, the more he will express his gratitude to Jesus Christ in an outgoing love towards Jesus Christ!

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

Read. Luke 5:17-26.

Discover and discuss. How does what this Bible passage teach, compare to what the parable teaches?

Notes. In Luke 5:17-26, Jesus healed a paralytic who was brought to Jesus by his four friends. Jesus realised that the real problem of this paralytic was above all his guilt in the sight of God. Jesus could look into the heart of the paralytic and see that he was very much aware of his sins and felt guilty and ashamed of his sins. Jesus could also look into the hearts of his four friends and see their faith in him and in what he could do. When Jesus saw the faith of the paralytic and the faith of his four friends, he was touched and said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven” (Luke 5:20).

The Pharisees and teachers of the law were indignant, because they regarded Jesus Christ as a blasphemer. They accused him of doing what only God could do, and that is, to forgive sins. In their hearts they argued that it was easier for someone to say *with words*: “Your sins are forgiven” than to do something *with a deed* for the paralytic. Jesus knew their thoughts and proved his claim that he is God¹ who took on the human nature² and that he had authority to forgive sins by instantly and completely healing the paralytic! Jesus Christ forgives sins of people on the basis of the sacrifice of atonement which he would bring on the cross. Because he makes atonement for sins, he has the right to cancel a person’s sins and to pronounce forgiveness of sins!

While the Pharisees were occupied with a negative religion with many prohibitions, like “You may not heal someone on the Sabbath”, Jesus occupied himself with positive actions by showing love to the needy people in this world.

¹ The Son of God

² The Son of Man