

KINGDOM. SUPPLEMENT 11

[THE PARABLES OF JESUS] THE HAND TO THE PLOUGH

“The parable of the hand to the plough” in Luke 9:61-62
is a parable about

DISCIPLESHIP IN GOD’S KINGDOM.

Read Luke 9:51-62.

1. Understand the natural story of the parable.

Introduce. The parable is told in figurative language and the spiritual meaning of the parable is based on that. Therefore we will first study the words and the cultural and historical facts of the background of the story.

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

Notes. A plough in the time of Jesus consisted of a strong wooden stick that was fastened diagonally on to a beam, which was pulled by an ox. The lower end of this stick had a sharpened point and served as the plough. The upper end of the stick served as the handle, to steer the plough in a straight line. However, if a man kept looking backwards instead of forward, he could not plough a straight furrow. It would be entirely proper for him to stop his plough, turn around and view what he has done, in order to correct his mistakes. But to keep on ploughing in one direction while looking in the opposite direction would not do.

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

Introduce. The context of “the story” of the parable may consist of “the setting” and “the explanation or application” of the parable. The setting of the parable may state the *occasion* for telling the parable, or describe *the circumstances* at the time of telling the parable. The setting is usually found *before* the story of the parable and the explanation or application is usually found *after* the story of the parable.

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

Notes.

(1) The setting of the parable is contained in Luke 9:51-61.

In verse 51, Jesus resolutely set his face towards Jerusalem. He was determined to go there and lay down his life for all those who believed in him. This determination of Jesus Christ is contrasted with the lack of determination from three would-be disciples!

This whole passage reminds us of the connection between Luke 9:22 with Luke 9:23-24. In the first passage Jesus says, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” And in the second passage he says to them all, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.” It is as if Jesus was saying that his own determination to accomplish the task that God had assigned to him must be the example of determination to all Christian disciples.

The teaching of Jesus concerning discipleship is the following:

The first four characteristics of a true disciples are found in Luke 14:26,27,33,34-35. A true disciple prefers Christ above all other relationships, is willing to share in the sufferings of Christ, prefers Christ above all his possessions and is like salt: giving flavour and combating corruption.

The fifth characteristic of a true disciple is not to look backwards. A true disciple is determined to be completely committed to Jesus Christ right to the end. This characteristic is emphasised by contrasting it with the lack of determination in three would-be disciples:

The first aspirant disciple was too eager to follow Jesus. He had neglected to count the cost of discipleship. He saw the crowds following Jesus, the miracles and the enthusiasm of people and he wanted to be closely associated with Jesus who was the centre of all this action. But as the gospel story developed, the province of Judea rejected him (John 5:18), the province of Galilee cast him out (John 6:66), the region of Gadara begged him to leave their district (Matthew 8:34), the province of Samaria refused to give him lodging (Luke 9:53), earth would not have him (Matthew 27:23) and finally even heaven forsook him (Matthew 27:46). Persevering discipleship implies the cost of struggle, rejection and suffering!

The second aspirant disciple was not ready to follow Jesus. On the one hand he wanted to become a close follower of Jesus like the apostles. On the other hand he set his own condition for following Jesus. He first wanted to go and bury his father, who had just died. Jesus wanted to impress on this particular man’s mind the fact that he, Jesus

Christ, is the sovereign Lord and must be obeyed completely and without qualification, condition or reservation. He wanted this man to understand that in the kingdom of God, the spiritual family of God is more important than the earthly family ties. Remember that Jesus is saying this to a particular aspirant disciple and not to everyone listening. Jesus does not say that Christians must not provide for their parents or care for their funeral. But Jesus does say that a Christian must love Jesus more than his parents. A disciple must obey Jesus unconditionally.

The third aspirant disciple probably did not know himself well enough. Jesus was able to see what this man could not see (John 2:25). Jesus knew his conscious deliberations and his unconscious motives. He was able to search this man's heart and read his mind. Jesus knew that when this aspirant disciple reached home, he would fall an easy prey to his family's fervent and emotional pleas to stay home and not to join Jesus and his other disciples.

At this point, Jesus told the parable of the hand to the plough.

(2) The story of the parable is contained in Luke 9:62 in the form of a proverb.

(3) The explanation or application of the parable is contained in the proverb.

It is an implied exhortation, "Once you have put your hand to the plough, never look back again! Otherwise you are not fit for service in the kingdom of God!"

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

Introduce. Jesus did not intend every detail in the story of the parable to have some spiritual significance. Parables are not allegories. The relevant details are those details in the story of the parable that reinforce the central point or main theme or lesson of the parable. Therefore, we should not ascribe independent spiritual significance to every detail of the story of the parable.

Discover and discuss. Which of the details in the story of this parable are really essential or relevant?

Notes. Jesus does not give any of the details any particular meaning. The details must be interpreted in relation to the context.

The one who puts his hand to the plough. He is obviously the person who aspires or intends to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. "Putting the hand to the plough" means making the decision and commitment to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Looking back. This is the central point or main message of the parable. This is what these three persons, who aspired or intended to become disciples, were doing, each in his own way. The first aspirant disciple made a decision to follow Jesus Christ without counting the cost and he would later have to look back and count the cost.

The second aspirant disciple wanted to follow Jesus Christ only under certain conditions and he was already looking back to his family responsibilities.

The third aspirant disciple also wanted to follow Jesus Christ without realising the negative influence his own family might have on his decision and he too was looking back towards people whom he considered more important than following Jesus Christ.

Not fit for service in the kingdom of God. This is Jesus' own interpretation and application of this parable or proverb. People who are not wholly committed and determined to follow Jesus Christ as a disciple, do not qualify for service in the kingdom of God.

4. Identify the main message of the parable.

Introduce. The main message (or central theme) of the parable is found either in the explanation or application or from the story itself. From the way Jesus Christ himself explained or applied the parables, we know how we should interpret parables. A parable normally has only one main lesson, one central point to make. Therefore, we should not try to find a spiritual truth in every detail of the story, but instead look for the one main lesson.

Discuss. What is the main message of this parable?

Notes.

The parable of the hand to the plough teaches about "discipleship in Gods' kingdom."

The main message of this parable is the following. "Every person is responsible to remain a determined and committed person. He must be wholeheartedly committed to follow Jesus Christ as a disciple to the end."

Commitment, especially commitment to discipleship, is one of the basic characteristics of God's kingdom. The genuine people of God's kingdom are determined to be completely committed to Jesus Christ. The heart of the man in the parable was divided. On the one hand he wanted to follow Jesus Christ, but on the other hand he wanted to please his family. However, Jesus Christ demands undivided commitment to discipleship! An aspirant disciple must count the cost of becoming a disciple of Jesus. He must make a deliberate decision to submit to Jesus Christ and wholeheartedly commit himself to continue follow Jesus Christ. And every day he must refuse to look backwards to what lies behind

him (that is, what it had cost him) and to keep on looking forward. Jesus Christ requires wholehearted commitment in discipleship.

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

Introduce. Some parables are similar to one another and can be compared. However, the truth in all the parables has parallel or contrasting truth taught in other passages of the Bible. Try to find the most important cross-references that help us to interpret the parable. Always check the interpretation of a parable with the direct clear teaching of the Bible.

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

Notes.

Joshua 24:15. The people of Israel were a people called to serve only the LORD, but the continual temptation was to serve the gods of the people in whose land they were living. There was continual pressure to conform to the people around them. The statesman Joshua said, "If serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River (Joshua 24:2), or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." He challenged the people of Israel to make a commitment either to serve the LORD (the God who revealed himself in the Bible) and not the gods of other religions. Neutrality towards the God of the Bible is impossible!

1 Kings 18:16-40. The people of Israel were a people called to worship only the LORD, but they really wanted to serve idols, especially Baal (the most important god of the Canaanites in the Middle East at that time). Their hearts were divided between the LORD and the Baals. The prophet Elijah said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is god, follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). He challenged the people of Israel to make a commitment either to worship the LORD or the gods of the people around them. Neutrality towards the God of the Bible is impossible!

Philippians 3:12-14. The apostle Paul had made a commitment that determined his whole life on earth! He did *one thing* and that was to forget what is behind and to strain forward towards what is ahead. He constantly kept looking at the goal of his life! This single-mindedness is also found in Psalm 27:4; Mark 10:21, Luke 10:42 and John 9:25.
