

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

A Kingdom of Spiritual Reciprocity

Jesus taught that in the kingdom of God there would be a new kind of reciprocity expressed in generosity. It would not be the old reciprocity of “an eye for an eye” (*lex talionis*), which largely concerned penal justice, but a new reciprocity of goodness, forgiveness, and benevolence. Jesus countered the old reciprocity of vengeance by saying: *Don't resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.*¹ *And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.*² *If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles* (Mt. 5:38-41).³

This new reciprocity is exemplified in the Lord's Prayer, where God, the Father, forgives generously those who in turn forgive others (Mt. 6:12, 14), but adds that an attitude of unforgiveness will also be treated with unforgiveness (Mt. 5:15). Several of Jesus' parables

THE LEX TALIONIS

The lex talionis (= law of retaliation) or “eye for an eye” aimed at a punishment resembling the offense in kind or degree. First appearing in the Code of Hammurabi (18th century BC), it addressed the tendency to avenge an injury far beyond the original wound. This type of law limits retaliation to no more than the original offense. The same law is to be found in Mosaic legislation as well (Ex. 21:23-25, 27; Lv. 24:19-20; Dt. 19:21),



In this oil lamp from the time of Jesus, olive oil was the standard fuel, and it floated upon the surface of an underlying layer of water. Water sealed the porous clay of the lamp, while a wick was inserted and salt could be used for a brighter flame.

address this aspect of the kingdom, and his stories were open to “whoever has an ear.” Such openness is especially singled out in the **Parable of the Lamp on a Stand** (Mt. 5:14-16; Mk. 4:21-25; Lk. 8:16-18). The Torah, according to the rabbis, was a divine lamp (cf. Ps. 119:105). Jesus said that the Pharisees had hidden that light by their selfish exclusiveness, and instead of helping others into God's kingdom, they were shutting them out (Mt. 23:13-14). His approach was markedly different! It was like setting a lamp on a lampstand so that all could clearly see. His parables on forgiveness were clear expressions of a new kind of reciprocity.

In the **Parable of the Two Men Praying in the Temple** (Lk. 18:9-14), Jesus told the story of two men who went to the temple to pray, presumably at

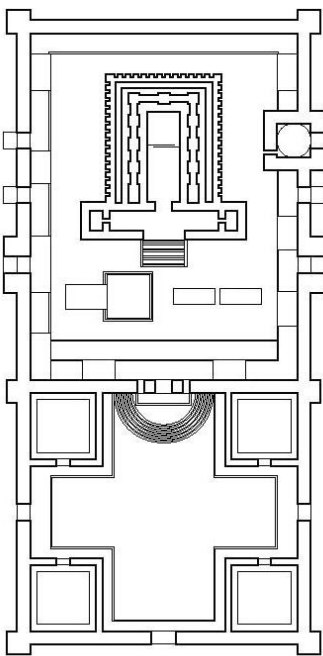
¹ Since most people are right-handed, to strike someone on the right cheek envisions a back-handed blow, which was a deep insult and often an accusation of blasphemy (cf. Ac. 23:2; Mt. 27:67-68). This gesture was punishable under Jewish law by a heavy fine, Mishnah, *Berakhot* 8.6, cf. J. Jeremias, *The Sermon on the Mount*, trans. N. Perrin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), p. 28.

² The tunic or *chiton* was the close-fitting undergarment in Middle Eastern dress. The more valuable outer garment or cloak was the *himaton*.

³ It was legal for a Roman soldier to commandeer a citizen to carry his military pack for a mile in an occupied country, cf. R. France, *Matthew [TNTC] (Leicester, England: Intervarsity, 1985), p. 127.*

THE DAILY TAMID (= "Continual")

Two publicly attended sacrifices of a year-old lamb were offered daily at the temple, one in the morning (about 9:00 AM) and the other in late afternoon (about 3:00 PM), as a sign of devotion to God (Ex. 29:38-41; Nu. 28:3-8). These sacrifices were funded by the annual half-shekel contributions from every adult male. Only lambs without defect or blemish were acceptable, emphasizing the offering's perfection and sanctity. The Tamid ritual included a structured liturgy, drawing lots for the priestly duties, cleansing the altar, and the offering of music and liturgical prayers.



The floorplan of the 2nd Temple is largely divided into two major spaces, the upper accessible only to the priests and the lower open to the people of Israel.

the offering of the *Tamid*, either the morning or afternoon sacrifice. This was not a time of private devotion but of public worship. It signified atonement for the worshippers, which is why Jesus' story focuses on being justified or "set right" with God. To be sure, each of the men offered a private prayer, but this only meant that they did so in the course of the temple service. Especially at the time of the offering of incense, which symbolized the prayers of the people, Jews who attended the service could offer personal prayers, because by this time the lamb had been sacrificed, covering the sins of the nation, and thus the way to God was now open.

The two men who came to pray represent the two Jews most distant from each other. The Pharisee was the epitome of the precise observer of the law. The tax collector (*telomai*) was widely viewed as a traitor to Israel, a true "sinner," since he was one of those to whom the Roman government farmed out tax collection duties. Tax collectors were notorious for distorting tax rates and squeezing subjects, so their low reputation was often earned. The two praying men did not stand next to each other. The Pharisee likely stood in a prominent place, perhaps at the front of the assembled worshippers, while the tax collector stood at a distance, knowing that he was disenfranchised and unworthy. Their manner of prayer was remarkably different. It was typical for Jewish prayer to be uttered aloud (cf. Mt. 6:5), and if so, then the prayer of the Pharisee was not only offered to God, but it was also a chance for him to display his superior status to those near enough to hear him. Whereas such prayers usually were expressions of thanks to God for blessings, the Pharisee's prayer is at once a subtle attack upon his fellow-worshippers, especially the tax collector who had the effrontery to attend the service at all, and a convenient form of self-advertisement. The tax collector, for his part, stood at a distance with lowered head, beating upon his breast and praying, *God, have mercy upon me, a sinner!* It was as if while the sacrifice was being offered, he prayed, "Let it be for me!" The typical posture of prayer is for a man to cross his arms over his chest, but this man, in the brokenness of his confession, actually beat upon his breast, a gesture of extreme anguish (cf. Lk. 23:48).

The climax of Jesus' story was blunt. The tax collector when home justified before God, for as Jesus concluded, "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." This is the reciprocity of the kingdom of God!

Two other parables concerning prayer concern reciprocity. The **Parable of the Friend at Midnight** (Lk. 11:5-8) is a story characteristic of a Palestinian village, where there would be no shops open before sunrise. Bread was baked daily, but by nightfall, little would be left. An unexpected guest had arrived at a man's home in the night, and he had no bread remaining from the day's baking. Still, he knew there still might be some left among his neighbors. In spite of the inconvenience, he knocked at the door of a friend, asking for three loaves. (Three loaves, relatively small compared to modern loaves, would be regarded as the normal meal for a single person.) The friend was annoyed and truculent, refusing to help. The house was dark, the door had been bolted, the children were in bed, and in a one-room house, which would be typical, it would be noisy and upsetting for the whole family to get up and unbolt the door. But the persistent man kept knocking, and though his neighbor was greatly annoyed, to get rid of him he got up and gave him what he needed. This story is one of the *a fortiori* parables in which the message is that if in common village life a man will arise to respond to the needs of his friend, even though annoyed, how much more will God hear and respond to the petitions of his children. God is not like some stingy neighbor! Therefore, Jesus urges, "Ask!" "Seek!" "Knock!" "For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened" (Lk. 11:9-10).

In the **Parable of the Unjust Judge** (Lk. 18:1-8),⁴ sometimes called the Parable of the Persistent Widow, a local magistrate was corrupt, and a widow (whether young or old, we do not know) petitioned him regarding a settlement, perhaps a debt or pledge or part of an inheritance. She did not seek vengeance, but justice. That she was the one who appeared in court suggests that she was alone, since normally, women do not appear in court. Some other male in the family would appear in her behalf. She was a woman in a man's world, a widow without money, and she had no influential friends. She was too poor to bribe, and because the judge expected such, he refused to hear her. Bribery in the ancient world was as widely known as it is in the modern world (cf. Is. 1:23). Still, she persisted, and to get rid of her, he settled her case. Hence, this parable is often interpreted as a teaching on the persistency of prayer. While such an angle is partly true (cf. 18:1), it is an incomplete assessment. The final thrust of the parable focuses on God's justice as the divine response to the prayers of those most vulnerable in society (18:7-8). Furthermore, it is important to note that this parable, like the previous one, is *a fortiori*. The reader is not to suppose that God is like an unjust magistrate who must be badgered into action or that by prayer one can batter down the walls of God. Rather, the point is that if an unjust judge can be moved to action by persistency, how much more will God give justice to those who are exploited, since God truly cares for the poor and powerless! To those who are praying for justice, the wait might seem long (cf. Rv. 6:9-11), but when the time comes, God will respond quickly (cf. Rv. 8:2-5).

Reciprocity in the kingdom of God is also clearly delineated in the **Parable of the Unmerciful Servant** (Mt. 18:21-25), and again, it begins with the familiar, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." This parable came as an answer to Peter's question about how often forgiveness should be extended—even up to seven times? —to which Jesus replied "seventy times seven!" To illustrate such unlimited forgiveness, Jesus told the story of a king settling accounts in which a creditor, probably a higher official and perhaps the governor of a province (given the amount of the debt), owed his lord an astronomical sum (10,000 talents or 750,000 pounds). If in gold, this

⁴ In this parable, there are striking similarities to Sirach 35:15-19. Jesus may have been referencing this passage.

would mean millions, possibly billions of dollars in current value. It was a debt beyond all conception. That the creditor had been imprisoned is implied by the verb “he was brought” before the king. Because he could not pay, everything he owned, including his family, was to be sold. Even so, it would have been a pittance in view of the insurmountable debt. That the man offered to repay the debt if given more time was only laughable. However, the king out of pity forgave the incredible debt. Then, though forgiven this immense debt, this creditor turned on one of his subordinates who owed him a trifling sum, and though this man also pled for mercy, the official mercilessly threw him into prison. When his fellow officials reported this hard-hearted inconsistency, the king arraigned the original creditor and put him to torture, because of his lack of compassion. Jesus then gave the clincher: this is the way the heavenly Father will treat those who do not forgive others from their hearts. As the Book of Common Prayer says concerning God, he is the One “whose property is always to have mercy.” But woe to the one who does not show the same mercy to others!

The **Parable of Lazarus and Dives** (Lk. 16:19-31)⁵ is unique in that it uses a personal name (Lazarus = “God helps”). It is the story of a rich man and a poor man. The rich man lived a life of luxury, dressed in a mantle of purple wool and underwear of Egyptian fine linen.⁶ The poor man, a cripple beset with skin disease, sat near the rich man’s gate begging from passersby. The scavenger dogs licked his sores. In the popular view, based on economics, the rich man was blessed by God while the poor man was in disfavor, a sinner under divine punishment. In time, both died. Lazarus was taken by angels to a place of honor, while the rich man ended up in the flames of hell, but in the story, he could see that Lazarus was now comforted and honored. In misery, the rich man asked Abraham to send Lazarus with just a drop of water, or at the very least, send someone to warn his five brothers not to come to this terrible place, but Abraham refused. The reciprocity of their reversals was fixed by death. The point of Jesus’ parable was not intended as a theology of the afterlife though some have taken it in this way), but the fact that for those who refuse to believe Moses and the prophets, even a resurrection would not convince them.

This parable was probably based on another popular story, an intentional adaptation of a known tale in the Middle East. If there is such a connection, then the reader of the parable must be careful about over-interpretation. The imagery of the parable, the flames of hell and the great gulf between the places of comfort and torment in the afterlife, are drawn from Jewish apocalyptic literature. There, the place of the righteous is a paradise guarded by angels where the deceased holy ones sing continually in worship toward God (2 Enoch 9). The place of torture is filled with perpetual blazes and rivers of fire (2 Enoch 10). All these are part of the local color of the parable.

THE TALE OF SI-OSIRIS

The tale of Si-Osiris, was brought from Egypt to Palestine by Alexandrian Jews. In this folk tale, a rich man had a sumptuous funeral but ended up in a state of torment after death, while a poor man, who had been buried without fanfare, was rewarded in the afterlife with luxury. This story found its way into Jewish folklore and was currently circulating in the time of Jesus.

⁵ The traditional name for the rich man, Dives, comes from a misunderstanding of the Latin Vulgate, *Homo quidam erat dives* (= there was a certain rich man), where the word *dives* is not a name but a Latin adjective meaning “rich.”

⁶ J. Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (Charles Scribners: New York, 1966), p. 143.