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Worship is impossible where there is an outstanding allegation of wrong doing

Some thoughts on Matthew 5:23-24 by Rev. Andy Foster

Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.

The words of the Saviour recorded here are part of His exposition of the meaning and application of the sixth commandment. In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, the Saviour is enlarging upon the permanent relevance of the Moral Law, summarized in the ten commandments, to the citizens of His kingdom i.e. all His people.

Perhaps it is initially surprising to find an application of *Thou shalt not kill* to the matter of preparing to worship God. There are few crimes more abhorrent than murder. By using this command as the basis for raising the issues relating to public worship dealt with in this text, the Saviour indicates how serious this matter of being in a fit state to worship God is. How we should abhor anything that intrudes upon it! The man in view must leave his sacrifice as if he has become conscious that he has committed a crime of blood. His accuser who is in the background has raised issues that are truly matters of life and death.

I OUR RELATIONS WITH OUR BRETHREN AFFECT OUR WORSHIP OF GOD.

1. Worship is not simply a bi-lateral interaction between the individual and God. Readiness to meet God entails a right relationship with each one described here as a *brother*. It does matter how we stand with our fellow men, and specially with those of the household of faith.

2. Clearly, there are circumstances when, if a brother has something against us, worship becomes impossible. This is obviously something of such importance that it cannot be ignored. There is no basis on which to proceed with the act of worship. It is to be abandoned until this issue has been resolved. It is to be noted that the worship involves a sacrifice or offering. Necessarily that entails worship that is looking to the Lord on the basis of atonement and forgiveness. Even that cannot be done until this outstanding issue has been resolved! This is a seriously sobering truth. In the position that the man of v24 finds himself in, he cannot approach God or even seek forgiveness while this matter is outstanding with his brother. This is a truth that should alarm any Christian who finds himself accused of wrong-doing by another.

II IT IS CLEAR FROM THE SAVIOUR'S WORDS THAT THE ISSUE IS A JUSTIFIABLE ACCUSATION OF WRONG DOING.

The context makes this clear. The illustration the Saviour uses is a development and an application of what He has already taught about this commandment in the previous verses.

1. Key words. In the context the Saviour is dealing with accusations levelled against another. One man is angry with another, calls him a fool, etc. Displeasure and anger are expressed and when that is done without a cause it is a sin that breaks the sixth command. However, when a justifiable cause exists, i.e. when the accusation and the anger relate to evident sin that has been committed, then there is no breach of the commandment. An angry denouncement of real sin is warranted and necessary. It is not a crime against God's law to express righteous indignation against that which God condemns. We may be angry and sin not, Eph 4:26.

2. Accused. The man in v24 has evidently been justifiably accused by a brother of wrongdoing. The Lord is emphatically not speaking of baseless accusations made against a Christian. If that was the case we could never worship God at any time because the wicked generally entertain prejudices and grievance against God's people. The point is—those accusations must be false!! In other words, we have a constant duty in preparing to worship God, to examine our own hearts to see if we can be justly accused of wrong doing by another. Where such justified accusation exists it must be immediately dealt with, for no acceptable worship



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can occur in the interval. As James teaches: we must come to God with clean hands and a pure heart. We must recognize as the Psalmist did: If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me, Ps 66:18. This statement clearly indicates that when sin is exposed—conceivably as a result of an accusation made by a brother—but continues to be countenanced, communication with God terminates until it is dealt with.

3. Fault recognized. The man in v24 recognizes the legitimacy of the accusation that has been made against him and hurries to deal with it. One whose heart is filled with a true desire for worship must act so.

III THE TWO OPTIONS THE LORD'S TEACHING LEAVES US WITH.

Every time we approach God in worship we face these two options.

Either,

1. I must be able justify my actions before the God I worship. Or, to put it another way, I must be able to assert before God that the accusation of wrong doing made against me is false.

Or,

2. I must acknowledge that the accusation is correct, acknowledge the sin I am accused of by a brother and proceed to deal with it.

1. Self-examination. Self-examination before God becomes necessary in the face of an allegation of sin made against us by a brother. We find an example of this response in David's life recorded in the opening words of Psalm 7.

Shiggaion of David, which he sang unto the LORD, concerning the words of Cush the Benjamite. O LORD my God, in thee do I put my trust: save me from all them that persecute me, and deliver me: Lest he tear my soul like a lion, rending it in pieces, while there is none to deliver. O LORD my God, if I have done this; if there be iniquity in my hands. (Ps 7:1-3)

The accusation made against David was clearly a bitter one, involving something of the ferocity of a lion! It came from one who was a political enemy as Cush belonged to the house of Saul and was clearly bent on hurting David and even ruining him. It would no doubt have been easy for David to dismiss Cush with a measure of contempt! Yet David took Cush's accusation to the Lord and considered it before Him. It is however, worthy of note that David did not deal with this in a private secret fashion. By writing of it as he did it became a matter of public record and part of his public ministry as a prophet of God! A public resolution of a public accusation of wrong doing was clearly the mind of the Spirit.

His self-examination is seen in his words to the Lord if I have done this, if there be iniquity in my hands... He did not presume to ignore or dismiss it out of hand, even though he indicates in v4 that he had to his certain knowledge done the very opposite to what he was charged with! If even the possibility existed that he was guilty as charged, he had to take it seriously and was ready for the consequences. So he took the matter before God and asked His verdict.

Had he been able to justify his actions before God, the worshipper in Matt 5:23-24 could safely have dismissed the accusation that was made against him by his brother and continued to worship God. In this scenario, the accuser would be seen to be making a false allegation and the unjustifiable displeasure and denouncement he had expressed are themselves a sinful breach of the sixth commandment. That is, the accuser becomes the offender not the one accused.

2. Sin recognized and acknowledged. However, in the case which the Saviour uses as an illustration of His teaching, clearly the man going to worship recognizes that he is justly accused and cannot proceed without answering that charge and putting it right. The urgency and importance of dealing with this matter is insisted upon.



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It is important to notice that the inferred accusation by his brother could not be ignored by this man. Mute disregard is not an option! Even if the ignored accuser is intimidated into silence, sin has been committed and communion with God is broken. God has taken notice! The clear command of Christ to be reconciled to his brother who has accused him is to be noted. The sin cannot be dealt with without involving the original accuser!

There is another serious implication to consider. Given the context of these words, in which the Saviour is expounding the command Thou shalt not kill, it is to be noted that had the man in v23 simply shrugged off the accusation of sin and continued with his offering, he would have become guilty of a breach of the sixth command.

How so? In the very same way that the Corinthian believers were guilty of it when they engaged in the Lord's supper without dealing with their sin! Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. 1 Corinthians 11:27. A Christian may bring upon their head something of the crime of putting Christ to death by continuing to worship while careless of sin. Paul lays that very charge against them.

There are solemn issues here for God's people to consider. Sin cannot be taken lightly. Fellowship with God is at stake. A wicked abuse of the suffering Saviour is possible. Every possibility that we have done wrong must be searched out and put right if sin has occurred.

Who shall ascend into the hill of the LORD? or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart...Psalm 24:3-4.