

"IF YOUR RIGHT HAND CAUSES YOU TO SIN ..."

Sometimes we wonder about whether our Lord Jesus is to be understood literally or figuratively. If it is literally, He often seems to make no sense at all and if it is figuratively (or allegorically, or metaphorically), then many offer all sorts of theories about how far to stretch the text and depart from it in order to "make sense."

At that point, all sorts of "interpretations" sprout up and, since the interpretations often differ from one another, more confusion and — sometimes — even discord may ensue. For example, from the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 5:30 *And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. [NKJV]*

Many of us have committed some sins with our right hand. So: why not be obedient and cut off that hand so that we may not sin again? Really, wouldn't it be better to be maimed in this world than to burn in hellfire for eternity?

Perhaps, one may think, Jesus did not really mean what He said: too many people on earth would be crippled and society will stop functioning, since so many jobs require two hands.

Hence, one may be led to try to interpret His words and rely on one's own understanding and common sense. His words are thus held to be metaphors, or allegories, as of a wise man; rather than the truth spoken by the Son of God:

Hebrews 4:12 *For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. [NKJV]*

Hence: what did Jesus really mean after all? Is this nothing but a generic warning that one should refrain from sinning? What about little sins? Plucking a couple of plump grapes at the supermarket? Is such a thing worthy of cutting off the hand? Why would Jesus use such a dramatic and cruel image?

Do I take what Jesus said literally or do I view it as a poetic license, a flight of fancy to catch the crowd's attention?

This is a serious dilemma: not unlike the predicament of Nicodemus.

John 3:3 *Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." [NKJV]*

This is another statement of Jesus that is confusing: is it literal or is it a metaphor, an allegory, a figure of speech?

Nicodemus realized that he was talking to a "teacher from God." He knew that this was not a figure of speech and took Jesus seriously and literally — what else could he do? Therefore:

John 3:4 *Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" [NKJV]*

Nicodemus realized and presented the physical, literal impossibility; but Jesus did not appease the common sense of Nicodemus:

John 3:5 *Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. [NKJV]*

Of course — as believers and as those who know the whole history of Jesus' ministry — we today understand that Jesus was not presenting a metaphor. He really and literally meant "born again of water and the Spirit."

The new birth is as real as the first birth, but it is not physical: it is both real and spiritual. There is a physical reality of the flesh and there is a reality of the Spirit.

John 4:24 *God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." [NKJV]*

God is Spirit: hence, to the extent that God is real, the Spirit is real as well: the Spirit is no less real than God is, but we cannot see or touch God and neither can we see or touch the Spirit.

Nicodemus' problem and failing were that he did not understand that the words and the teachings of Jesus are to be understood literally, very literally: as literally and precisely as possible — and in the spirit.

Nicodemus showed an example of common sense interpretation: he took "literal" to mean "physical" and produced confusion and lack of understanding for himself. Similarly today, interpretations, which take "literal" to mean "physical," often cause confusion, and, especially, lack of understanding and unbelief: ultimately leading to denial of the spiritual message.

This should not surprise us, because we also read that Jesus said that His words are spirit: they are not flesh to be understood by the flesh and common sense.

John 6:63 *It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life. [NKJV]*

To bring it all together, let's remember what the Apostle Paul wrote:

Galatians 4:6 *Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" [NKJV]*

And:

Ephesians 4:18 *being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; [NASB]*

To sum up: **1]** Jesus' words are spirit; **2]** the heart is where the spirit resides, therefore **3]** I can steer clear of intellectual or common sense interpretations and shun ignorance; rather I may gain spiritual understanding of reality and truth, when there is no hardness in my heart.

Let's now conclude by returning to the right hand. Do I cut it off or not? The text is very clear.

First, I should note that Jesus did not say to cut off the hand, rather He said, "if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off."

Second, there is no question that we sinned, but what was it that caused us to sin? Let us beware of common sense interpretations and the consequent misunderstandings (or lack of understanding).

The Apostle James gives us a measure of spiritual insight:

James 1:14-16 *But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. ¹⁵Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. ¹⁶Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. [NASB]*

That which caused me to sin was lust. The hand is no more the cause of the sin that the knife may be the cause of the killing. Both the knife and the hand are but means: I can use them either for obeying or for sinning. Jesus taught us to look for the cause: it is the cause, which must be cut off. To cut off one of the means and leave

the cause won't work out at all: the cause will quickly find other means.

Hence, what I must cut off and do it quickly, before it causes me to sin further and be cast into hell, is my lust. I may keep my right hand: but I must not keep my lust.

Cutting off the right hand would be an example of what? No, not of "wrong interpretation" ("wrong" as if there were another "interpretation," which is more convenient, more alluring or more fashionable). Rather it would be an example of unregenerate, lack of understanding, following the flesh.

So that there may be no doubt about the deception of carnal, fleshly "interpretations" and misunderstandings, let's remember that:

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 *Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? ²⁰For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's. [NKJV]*

Our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Woe to us if we disfigure such a temple by maiming it wantonly and foolishly.

Lusts are what must be cut off: cut them off we must and "cast them from us." God has zero tolerance for sin: to the point of sacrificing His own Son to redeem us from its deadly wages.

In conclusion: let's be on guard and not be deceived by false "interpretations." There is nothing to "interpret": on the contrary, there is always much to "understand" — by the heart — in the spirit.

How do we cut off lust? There is where the power of Jesus' redemption comes to us:

Romans 6:3-4; 6-8; 11 *Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. ⁶knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; ⁷for he who has died is freed from sin. ⁸Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, ¹¹Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. [NASB]*