

THE SCRIPTURAL RULE FOR ADJUSTING MISUNDERSTANDINGS

WE CANNOT IMAGINE a case in which a brother with average intelligence would need comfort and counsel in a misunderstanding other than that for which the Lord has provided in Matt. 18:15-17. If he has been in the habit of seeking sympathy in a busy-bodying manner, the sooner he knows that his course is wrong the better. He should learn to use his own mind along lines where there is positive instruction in the Scriptures. The Lord says to any one who has aught against his brother, "Go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone." If the matter is too small to mention to the brother, it is too small to notice and should be forgotten.

There are *no exceptions* to the rule laid down in Matt. 18:15-17; but there might be, under some circumstances, an *interpretation* of the rule. For instance, if the matter were in a family, there might be circumstances in which it would be proper to go to the head of the family. If it were in an institution, where the individual might be merely a representative of the Society, it would be proper to go to the head of the Society. Such a course would result from following Matt. 18:15, in its logical trend. But these are minor applications of the rule, which is neither voided nor avoided, but in applying which wisdom is being used in determining how the matter may be carried out.

There is no doubt that much of the trouble in the world is the result of misunderstanding. It therefore behooves every one of the Lord's people to "put on love, which is the bond of perfectness," and to overlook much of what others do. (Col. 3:14.) And yet it would be proper for one who thinks that he has been wronged to go to the offending brother and have a clear understanding. To do so would result favorably in nearly every case.

The instruction in Matt. 18:15-17 is given, of course, only to the brethren, the Church, and is not, therefore, to be applied outside. But whoever learns to apply this rule to the brethren will find that it commends itself to his best judgment as a wise course of conduct in all the affairs of life. Thus his natural inclination will be to apply the same principles in connection with worldly matters and worldly people. He must, however, use wisdom in considering which would be the wise way to deal with the world. Some of the deep and precious things which belong to the Church the world would resent. So the Lord admonishes that we should not "cast our pearls before swine."

While we are endeavoring to do good to all men, yet in the case of the brethren there should be no discrimination in this matter. We might say, however, that some of the Lord's people seem to be unduly and unreasonably exercised along some lines. For instance, if a brother should find another brother in the Truth who seemed to discriminate in his feelings and apparently to be more appreciative of another than of himself, he should not take offense. He should say, "There are differences of character and temperament; and Brother B. might commend himself to Brother A. more than would another. All that I may ask is that Brother A. shall love me; that he shall not hate me; that he shall not do me injury." Nothing in the Word of God indicates that the brethren are all to be esteemed alike!

Our Lord Himself showed just such a discrimination in His love. He did it, however, "without partiality and without hypocrisy." But because of the differences in our fallen human nature some of the brethren are more congenial to us than are others. We should, therefore, be content to have the love of the brethren, and should endeavor to merit more of it – and to have our words and conduct such as to become more lovable to the brethren and thus to draw more of their esteem. The way to do this is, not by finding fault with those who do not love us up to the highest degree, but by trying to develop that character which would merit a fuller measure of love.

If such a question as this be raised and is not treated along the lines of Matt. 18:15, one should advise thus: "Brother A. seems to have none but the kindest feelings toward you, dear brother." Then if Brother B. says that he does not receive Brother A.'s love and companionship as does Brother C., one might reply, "Well, my dear brother, have we not the right to have a special fellowship with *one* if we do no injury to *another*? I think that we have, and that we have the Lord's example in this direction. This does not mean that I should treat you unkindly. It is not wrong for a brother to have more or less of a *preference*, providing that he does not use this preference to offend another *intentionally*."

VARYING DEGREES OF LOVE

Love is not justice. Love cannot be *commanded*; it must be *induced*; and there must be a cause for the love. It would be thoroughly out of order for any one to tell us that we should love God if He were not a lovable Being. Similarly, how could we love any creature who is unlovely? We love the brethren because we see something of God-likeness in their good intentions, and in the fact that they have given their hearts to the Lord.

In a case where the brother's flesh is much fallen, we have largely a *compassionate* love, rather than a loving admiration; for only in proportion as we see character-likeness to Christ can we truly love His followers. But we should regard every brother and every sister with a sincere desire to do them good; and the same love, of course, should extend, as we have opportunity, to the world in general.

The great difficulty in cases of misunderstanding is that *the Lord's counsel is not accurately followed*. Good, honorable brethren, anxious to do right, who apparently would be quite competent to advise others, seem to think that *theirs* is a different case – seem not to exercise the proper judgment. Instead of going to the brother and saying, kindly, "Brother, I have come to see you in reference to a little matter, following the advice of Matt. 18:15," he, on the contrary, meets the

brother and says, "Brother, you have done so and so." He goes to the [R4985 : page 82] brother, not to be reconciled, but rather, dictatorially, to show him that there is something wrong. This is not the right way to go about a matter. As surely as Justice is the foundation of God's Throne, just so surely are those who pursue this course failing to follow the principles of justice; they are failing to develop the Lord's character and will *fail to win the prize*.

The spirit of the Lord's injunction is to *help* a brother, not to twit him, nor to anger him, nor to tease him; not to entrap him into saying what he did not intend to say, nor to distort the meaning of what he has said. Such is not the right spirit. No brother should be approached in this manner. But the matter should be considered in the most kindly way; and if then – in spite of all that one can do – the wrong is continued, we should have nothing more to say. Some might say, "He did not apologize." The Lord did not say anything about his apology. But if he recognizes that he is wrong and fails to apologize, he is doing *himself* injury.

LET US BEWARE OF BUSYBODYING

If the second step in Matt. 18:15-17 be found necessary, it should be taken only after very deliberate thought and prayer, with the desire to make sure of doing the Lord's will. First of all, one should make sure that the matter is of sufficient importance to ask the brethren to go along! and that it is something against *us*, not against *another*; that it is not *busybodying*; that it is something that is being done *now*. If this is the case, take two others along. Do not say, "If I ask you to go along, be sure to stand by me." *We* may be *the ones in error*; and if we are we should be more anxious to be *corrected ourselves* than to have the *other brother* corrected.

If we make sure that the matter is important, we should select two that we think would be friends of the brother injuring us – fair-minded, honorable people in the Church. Then, after the party has met with the offending brother and discussed the case, it would be proper for these

brethren to advise us. If the advice were something that we could follow, we should do so and bring peace and harmony.

But if this course should avail nothing and the injurious actions should continue, then it would be proper for us to bring the matter to the attention of the Church. The two brethren who went with us, and decided with us that it was impossible to persuade the evil-doer to alter his course, should say to the Elders of the Church that they had a case to present for a *hearing*; but they should not *make charges*. The Church is merely to hear the matter, to see whether there is any *real cause* of complaint. But at *this* stage of the affair they *know merely* that there is a case to be heard. Then the Elders should call a special meeting for such a purpose, saying to the Church that there is a case to be brought before the Class, and asking what time would be convenient for them to hear the matter. Then the Church should decide when to call a meeting to consider the case.

This would be the time for the one against whom the complaint lodges to say to the Elders, "It is true that there were charges made against me by the brother, and that two others afterward came with him. But I claim, brethren, that the charges are *not true*, that the matter is one of my private concern, and that others have nothing to do with it;" or whatever he wishes to say. Then there must be brought evidence to show that there is really a matter to come before the Church, that it is not merely a case of *busybodying*; for the Church must not meet together to participate in busybodying.

Then it would be proper for the Elders to learn enough to decide whether or not the Church would be busybodying in this man's affairs – merely enough to inform themselves whether it were a matter to come before the Church. If they thought that it was not, they should say to the offended one, "This brother is not doing you an injury." But if either of the parties still thought that it should be brought before the Church – that Matt. 18:15-17 had been followed as far as possible to this point – and if the Elders of the Class were unwilling to bring it before the

congregation, then it would be proper for the *congregation* to determine whether or not they would hear the case, and their hearing should be final.

HOW TO CONDUCT A CHURCH TRIAL

In any matter heard before the congregation there should be an opportunity for each one interested to present his side of the case – the one to state his trouble and the other to answer. At no stage of the proceedings should unkind words be permitted. The person who attempted to use them should be considered reprehensible on that account, and his conduct worthy of being judged a misdemeanor. This course is the one which the Lord evidently intended should be followed. The point, however, always to be borne in mind is whether people are really busyboding in other men's matters – a course which should not be encouraged, either by the Class or by the Elders. People waste a great deal of time in evil counsels, in a manner quite contrary to the Golden Rule and to Matt. 18:15.

If the congregation, after patiently hearing definite, positive charges of sufficient importance, finds that notwithstanding these various steps the brother against whom complaint is made has really been doing wrong and is continuing to do so, they should decide that he is guilty as charged. The vote of the Church should be unanimous, if possible; all partisanship should be ignored. Since they are not condemning any one to eternal torment, nor judging him in any way, their advice must not carry with it any penalty whatever. They are merely advising the brother that his conduct is contrary to the Scriptures; and that if he does not change his course, they cannot longer treat him as one of the Lord's people.

In disfellowshipping him, they are not to ill-treat him; for we do not act so with publicans and sinners. But we would not ask a publican or a sinner to take part in the service, either as an Elder or as a Deacon or in any other capacity; so the offending brother is not to be asked to offer prayer, or to do anything that an outsider would not be asked to

do. *Thus* the congregation would withdraw their fellowship. He is a brother still, but not in the best of standing; for he has neglected to hear the voice of the brethren in the way that the Lord has directed.

It might be possible, however, for a whole class to go astray in its judgment in a matter, and to decide against a brother who was in the right. This brother might then say, "My dear brethren, I appreciate your view in this matter; and I am sorry that anything in my course should seem to be worthy of condemnation. I promise you that I will modify the matter as best I am able. Although in justice to myself I cannot alter my view, nevertheless, in respect to your united voices I will not in the matter follow my judgment, which I feel is the *correct* one. And if, therefore, I suffer some injustice, the Lord will count it to me in the nature of a sacrifice for the sake of His Body, the Church. So, then, dear brethren, while thanking you for your kindly expressed [R4985 : page 83] sentiment, I still wish you to know that it does not do me justice. And I think that you will inform me of your change of mind on the subject if you ever should change."

If the brother were really in the wrong, he might say, "Well, then, put me out!" The Class might say, "We are not putting you out. Do not say that you will withdraw from us. We will not take your remark for your answer. We hope that the Lord will have you see that our action has been most kindly, brotherly, and that it is a part of our duty now to conform to the views of the Class. If the Lord shows us that we are wrong, we shall be very glad to acknowledge it. But in the meantime, dear brother, we do not wish to offend you, but merely desire to do our duty to the Lord and to His Word."

This course would be the proper one; we should not erect a barricade between brethren. But it would be very easy to do injury to such a brother by saying, "Well, never show your face here again unless you take back every word you have said." The majority of people have so much self-esteem that they would not go back after such a statement;

whereas they might do so if the Spirit of the Lord, the Spirit of love and justice is manifested.

