

A Study in Matthew 18:15–16

Moreover If Thy Brother Shall Trespass — The Three Steps of Gaining a Brother

We are reading Matthew chapter 18, beginning at verse 15.

"Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established."

"And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Matthew 18 and the Theme of Littleness

The word that opens verse 15 — moreover in the King James, but in Darby's translation — is a linking word. It joins the subject of verse 15 with what has preceded it in the chapter. Matthew 18 is a very beautiful chapter, and the Lord knew in advance what He was going to say and that all these words were going to be here together. Before entering on verse 15 it is worth noting the moral atmosphere of the first fourteen verses, because the passage does not stand alone.

The chapter opens with the disciples asking who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And Jesus called a little child (v. 2). Become as little children (v. 3). Whosoever shall humble himself as this little child (v. 4). Whoso shall receive one such little child (v. 5). But whoso shall offend one of these little ones (v. 6). Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones (v. 10). Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish (v. 14). The word little, and the attitude it describes, runs through everything. Willingness to be little. Willingness to take a low place.

Ephesians 4:2–3 has the same moral character: with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is something about willingness to be small that precedes the things we read from verse 15 onwards. And

the other end of the chapter shows the opposite attitude — an exaction from somebody who owes something, a heavy-handed creditor out of control. The passage of verses 15–20 is thus surrounded on both sides: the attitude to be cultivated first (humility, littleness), and the attitude which should not characterize a Christian last (the unforgiving servant). Both are instructive for understanding what is set forth in between.

Why the Assembly Appears in Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew is the only one of the four in which the assembly is mentioned. That has puzzled some, since Matthew is characteristically a Jewish book. But Matthew is not only Jewish — it is also strongly governmental and dispensational. It traces most emphatically the rejection of the Lord Jesus by Israel, and that rejection reaches its decisive point in chapter 12, where the emissaries from Jerusalem charge that the Lord's power is Beelzebub's power. This is the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Then in chapter 13, the similitudes of the kingdom of heaven in mystery are introduced — marking the change consequent upon the rejection of the Lord Jesus. Matthew traces this turning point and its implications more clearly than any other Gospel.

The first verse of Matthew says: the book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Not son of Abraham, son of David — but son of David first, then son of Abraham. He is presented as king. And if that nation rejects Him, the question immediately arises: is there then no place where His authority is to be acknowledged? God forbid. That is precisely why we get scriptures about the assembly in Matthew's Gospel. The assembly was to replace Israel as the center of the administration of God's governmental ways — the collective aspect of things. So it is entirely appropriate that in Matthew 16, the Lord says: I will build my assembly, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And in Matthew 18, we get the first function of that assembly described. The governmental and dispensational character of this Gospel makes it exactly the right place for these things, and it would not have been suitable in the other Gospels.

Matthew 18:20 is thus central in this context. The presence of the Lord in the midst of two or three gathered together in His name is not a kingdom assembly of two or three apostles, as some have taught. Such an idea generates a whole set of further difficulties and requires elaborate reinterpretation of everything around it. This is simply the assembly that Christ was going to build, spoken of prospectively — awaiting the ascension into glory, the sending down of the Spirit, and the actual gathering of souls to His name. The Lord speaks of it here because this is the book in which to speak of it.

The Object: To Gain Thy Brother

Verse 15 is not: if thy brother trespass against thee, go and get him. The object is stated plainly at the end of the verse: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. The whole passage takes its character from that object. It is not to vindicate oneself. It is not to achieve the satisfaction of having been proved right. The desire is to gain the brother — to get the matter right in his soul, and not only between themselves, but before God.

This places a very demanding requirement on the offended party. To go with the sole aim of gaining the brother, keeping oneself entirely out of it, requires that the flesh be judged at every step. If my brother has wronged me in some way, it is exceedingly difficult for me to be 100% objective and truly desire nothing but the gain of the one who wronged me. That is what is called for. And it is fitting that the chapter opens with the call to be as a little child, because that is exactly what this kind of love requires — a willingness to be small before God and before the brother, setting aside the instinct to defend and vindicate oneself.

It is possible also that God's purpose in allowing the trespass to take place was not only to deal with the one who committed it, but to deal with the one against whom it was committed — to see whether the attitude of the first fourteen verses is really there. The test of verse 15 measures us as much as the trespasser.

There is also a verse in Leviticus — approximately: thou shalt not suffer sin upon thy brother — which shows that even under the law, a genuine care for one's brother meant one could not simply allow sin to remain there upon him. The care for a brother's good requires that sin be addressed, not overlooked. The priest of the New Testament who says, let us just forgive him, without the rebuke and the steps that lead to actual repentance, is not serving the brother's good. He is sparing himself. That is what that attitude amounts to — a desire to avoid the discomfort of confrontation by dressing it up as generosity. The Luke 17:3 principle is: if thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. The rebuke comes first. Forgiveness follows repentance. That is the scriptural order.

Tell Him His Fault — What Hearing Means

Go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone. The word in the original for tell him his fault carries more than the force of a complaint. Darby's footnote on the word notes that it means to show the true character of something so as to convict, and hence to reprove by showing a man's fault. It is used in John 8:46 in the sense of convince; in John 16:8 it means bring to demonstration; in Ephesians it means reprove and expose. There is a character that goes beyond complaining. If I come to a brother and complain about how he wronged me, that is not what is in view here — because coming merely to complain is hardly consistent with the spirit of winning him.

It is important to observe also what the verse does not require. It does not say you must convince him. It does not say you must get him to confess his fault. The responsibility of the offended one is to tell him. Whether he receives it or not is his own affair before God. Having told him, the responsibility is discharged. The question is whether he hears — and that brings us to what hearing means.

Hearing in verse 15 is not a matter of the ears functioning. The repeated warning in Revelation 2 and 3 — he that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the assemblies — is not addressed to the physically deaf. Hearing there means profiting by the exhortation, responding to it, acting upon it. In the same way, the expression hearing the rod in the prophets means more than feeling the rod. One feels the rod when it strikes. One hears the rod when one receives instruction from the blow. Here, if he shall hear thee means: if he acknowledges the trespass, if his heart is opened to it and he responds accordingly. That acknowledgment the flesh will not make of itself. It is a moral condition. The Darby translation uses if he do not hear thee at the start of verse 16 — showing that it is not physical deafness but moral unwillingness that is in view.

Two or Three Witnesses — and the Nature of the Trespass

Verse 16: if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. This intermediate step has a double purpose. First, it confirms that the matter is real and demonstrable — not a question of one person's word against another's, not something that can simply be denied. Before the assembly is involved at all, the thing must be established in the mouth of witnesses. Hearsay, vague complaints, and unsubstantiated allegations have nothing to do with this process. These are serious matters and require a demonstrable basis.

Second, this step also changes the character of the sin. By the time the matter has gone through the first two stages, the trespass is no longer only what it was at the beginning. The person who has refused to hear one brother, and then refused to hear two or three more, has added something to his original wrong — a stubbornness and entrenchment that takes on the character of contumacy. An old word, but fitting: willful resistance to authority, a ramping-up of self-will. What began as a trespass has now been met with an intensifying refusal. This is the progression in the three steps: verse 15, if he will not hear thee; verse 16, if he will not listen to them; verse 17, if he shall neglect to hear the church. Each stage involves a higher degree of willfulness. It is not only that the trespass remains unresolved — it is that the soul of the trespasser is increasingly hardening itself.

As for the nature of the trespass itself: it is left general in the passage. This is not a list of specifically named offenses, in the way that 1 Corinthians 5 lists certain character-types who are to be put away. What is in view is something real and demonstrable, capable of being proved in the mouth of witnesses,

serious enough to merit the process described. It could in some cases be what is described at the end of the chapter — a failure to show compassion, an exaction from a fellow servant that violated the spirit of forgiveness already received. Whatever the specific character of the trespass, by the time it has escalated through these stages of refusal, it has taken on the character of something that cannot simply be left alone. Its stubbornness has begun to look like the self-will that Scripture elsewhere associates with rebellion and idolatry.

The Assembly Is Not a Deliberative Jury

If the two or three witnesses have not gained the brother, the matter is to be told to the church — the assembly. And the assembly's role at that stage is important to understand correctly. By the time the matter comes before the assembly, it has already been established. The proof is in hand. The assembly is not convened to conduct a trial, with a prosecutor and a defense counsel presenting competing arguments and the assembly sitting as a jury deliberating on the facts. The evidence has already been established in the mouth of two or three witnesses. What the assembly pronounces on is a matter already proven before it — and the assembly speaks to it with the authority described in verse 18.

This has bearing on what kinds of things can reach this stage. Things that are entirely private between two people, without any witnesses, cannot ordinarily be brought before the assembly on the word of one party alone. The first step — going alone between thee and him alone — if done correctly, leaves no external documentation at all. If that step is successful, there is nothing to bring before the assembly, and no need arises. If that step is unsuccessful, the matter proceeds to two or three more. It is at this stage that the case begins to be established, and it is that established case which can come before the assembly. The assembly then has before it something solid, something demonstrable, and speaks to it. God knows whether the first step was taken rightly, even though it cannot be formally proved.

The object throughout is to gain the brother — and behind that, the honor of the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.