

Thoughts on Matthew chapters 5 and 18

It was remarked this morning how blessed it was to hear the Christ exalting ministry from our visiting brother last Thursday night, particularly in regard to the “One greater than Jonas.” Our subject this afternoon is from the same Gospel. While it will not focus directly on the personal glories of Christ, our subject is vital in regard to our testimony to Christ and to His glory. There is nothing more damaging to the testimony to His glory, than discord among those who are responsible for its proclamation. Which brings us to a subject that has weighed on hearts in recent times – the Lord’s appointed ways to deal with matters that disturb and potentially divide the saints. “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!” (Ps 133:1).

Matthew 5:21–24

“Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment [the secular law courts]. But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment [the secular law courts]. and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca [vain, worthless], shall be in danger of the council [the Sanhedrin]; but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire [divine judgment]. 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 biblical context

These early chapters of Matthew must be considered in the light of the fact, that at that time the kingdom was being offered to Israel, with Jesus of Nazareth as its Messiah, Prophet, Priest and King. Here in chapter 5 we see Him as the Prophet, revealing the mind of God in regard to the moral behaviour within the kingdom.¹ This is followed by practical teaching to His Jewish disciples: they are “the salt of the earth.”

The context thus relates to the Jews, the law and the kingdom on offer. For this reason we must guard against a strict application to believers under grace in Christ. We cannot, for instance, take the altar to be a type of the Lord’s Supper. Yet, it would be a great injustice to the passage and a practical failing to disregard its moral principles. They reflect proper behaviour within the kingdom of heaven whatever its phase.²

The code of behaviour

In the passage before us the Lord deals with matters that are foreign to the self-righteous Pharisees, who were concerned more about the letter of the law than its spirit. It is what lies within the heart that really

¹ The beatitudes reflect Christ’s glory in manhood.

² They speak too of the moral responsibilities and character of the faithful remnant during the Tribulation, of whom the disciples in Matthew 5 are a figure.

marks the character of the kingdom of heaven. Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaketh!³ And so the Lord addresses the matter of *unresolved* personal offense; a genuine offense due to a misunderstanding, an unkind word, a dislike or a trying attitude.

We refer to a genuine offense, because we all have the potential to be oversensitive or vexatious, ready to make something out of nothing. Solomon's advice is timely: "He that is slow to wrath is of great understanding; but he that is hasty of spirit exalteth folly" (Pro 14:29). Nor is the grief ill-feeling, which sometimes follows godly correction from the Word of God by shepherds and teachers. Let us "esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake" and so be at peace among ourselves (1 Thess 5:13). May we encourage each other to do nothing "through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves" (Php 2:3).

It is then, something that I did; that I did not do, or what I have said, that has "justly" offended (verse 22). And so the Lord counsels me. If I remember that I have offended my brother – go to him and put the matter right. There are a number of things to note here.

First, the offense is not to be spread abroad or voiced within the local assembly; which brings before us a vital recurring principle in the Lord's teaching. Personal matters are not to be elevated into assembly matters; and assembly matters are not to be reduced to personal matters. The moment a personal matter is brought into the public or assembly domain, the Lord's instructions in this passage are extinguished. The passage can no longer be appealed to. There is nothing here too about involving others in the undertaking. The essence of the imperative may be stated as follows: "I beseech thee, be reconciled with me." Observe; it is to be reconciled *with* me and not *to* me! It is a meeting of hearts and minds in private with a mutual willingness for reconciliation.⁴

Second, the undertaking begins when I *remember* that I have caused another to be offended. Now I cannot remember something of which I have no knowledge. It is supposed that the grief is known to both parties. It may be that the offense was brought to my attention by the offended person or by a third party. I may have unknowingly offended someone and another draws near and says, "brother, what you did, did not do, or what you said, has caused so and so to be offended."

Third, the initiative and responsibility for reconciliation is not taken by the offended person, but by the *offender*. This is in keeping with the principle of moral responsibility in the kingdom of heaven – self-examination!⁵ It is opposed to the way of the world, where the offended person takes the initiative. I have been offended, and so I must pursue my right of redress and explore every avenue in doing so. We are

³"For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:20). That is, righteousness must go beyond the external letter of the law. It must come through the spirit of the law – which is Christ.

⁴The preposition *dia* gives the meaning as "two, between two" (Robertson NT Grammar).

⁵This is not the self-examination that we get in 1 Corinthians 11 in regard to the Lord's Supper. There it is in regard to my manner and motive in partaking of the emblems – not my relationship with my brethren.

encouraged to be assertive as a mark of character and strength; but how contrary to the spirit of meekness and the kingdom! There is an inevitable downward course in the making for all who follow such advice. It begins with *self-assertion* which leads to *self-vindication*, which degenerates into *self-exaltation* and, finally, we end up with *self-destruction*. There will be less wilfulness and self-assertion if there is a greater willingness for self-examination. Paul mirrored the timeless moral principle of the kingdom of heaven when he declared to the aggrieved Corinthians, “Why do ye not rather take wrong?” Blessed are the meek!

Fourth, until I seek and effect a resolution I must leave my gift at the altar. This is because an unresolved offense places a barrier to *my* fellowship with God. Holy hands must be lifted up; and so we have here the altar brought in. Before offering the sacrifice of praise and the fruit of the lips, or indeed any service unto the Lord, heartfelt reconciliation must be sought. We say *sought*, because sadly there are occasions where some will ever complain but never comply. They are to be left to the Lord!

Fifth, it is not said or implied that an unresolved offense means that the offended person must leave his gift at the altar – unless of course he adds anger to his aggrieved heart.

Sixth, an unresolved offense does not give the offended person liberty to declare his case publically by word or actions, or by cultivating a party spirit within the assembly. If that happens then it is he that has caused an offense and should leave his gift at the altar. Moreover, such actions are a serious breach of unity and fellowship and may require assembly discipline.

Matthew 18:15–22

“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 anything 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. Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven” (Matt 18:15–22).

The context

Here the Church is brought in. By this time Israel as a nation has been set aside in principle. While the kingdom was on offer, evangelism was confined to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:6). But after the alleged blasphemy of the Spirit we get “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28); we are then treated to the seven dispensational parables, the first four given by the sea, preceded by the Lord’s question, “Who is my mother? and who are my brethren?”

(Matt 12:48). After this we get the blessing of the Canaanite woman, a Gentile, on the ground of her confession and Christ's lordship, rather than Him as the Son of David, which is Jewish ground.

The subject again is personal behaviour within the kingdom of God, but now specifically regarded in the light of the kingdom of God's dear Son. "[God] Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son" (Col 1:13). The Church in this dispensation is within the kingdom, and so these moral principles are relevant to us. Though a heavenly people, we have to deal with earthly relationships. But first we need to review the particular character of the church.

The character of the local church

In Matthew 16 we have the church universally and in chapter 18 the church locally. The universal and local churches take their character from the heavenly Head, the exalted Christ. In both cases the term "body" is used. In the first it is *the* Body of Christ with the definite article; in the second it is neither *the* body nor *a*body, but simply "body" of Christ. The absence of the article conveys the thought of "character." It is vital to acknowledge this truth and its practical significance. When Paul writes to the church at Corinth, he refers to them as "ye are body of Christ" (1 Cor 12:27). In his corrective ministry he reminds them that they must reflect the heavenly character of Christ as Head.

Responsibility in the local church

Maintaining the character of the local assembly means acting in a manner that glorifies its Head. And so we come naturally to the subject of assembly order and behaviour. While this is the responsibility of all in fellowship, is to be overseen by the under-shepherds, who will give account of their stewardship to the Chief Shepherd. "And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away" (1 Pet 5:4). It is no surprise then that the Chief Shepherd provides clear instructions in these matters.

Public and private matters

Here too we must be mindful that assembly matters must not be reduced to personal matters, and personal matters must not become assembly matters. Scripture makes a clear distinction between the two and we must be alert to it. "He that covereth a transgression seeketh [procures] love; but he that repeateth a matter separateth very friends" (Pro 17:9).

The trespass

We conclude from the grammar and context, the category of offense in Matthew 18 is not the same as in Matthew 5. Here it is a matter of **trespass** – a personal *wrong* committed by a believer in *temporal* transactions with another believer. In Leviticus 6 we have this matter dealt with under the *law*, which demands restitution and compensation.

"If a soul sin, and commit a trespass against the LORD, and lie unto his neighbour in that which was delivered him to keep, or in fellowship, or in a thing taken away by violence, or hath deceived his neighbour; Or have found that which was lost, and lieth concerning it, and sweareth falsely; in any of all these that a man doeth, sinning therein: Then it shall be, because he hath sinned, and is guilty, that he

shall restore that which he took violently away, or the thing which he hath deceitfully gotten, or that which was delivered him to keep, or the lost thing which he found, Or all that about which he hath sworn falsely; he shall even restore it in the principal, and shall add the fifth part more thereto, and give it unto him to whom it appertaineth, in the day of his trespass offering” (Lev 6:2-7).

In the NT – in 1 Corinthians 6, we have it dealt with under *grace*, which calls for self-abnegation i.e., suffering wrong!

“Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints? Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more **things that pertain to this life**? If then ye have judgments of **things pertaining to this life**, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church. I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goeth to law with brother, and that before the unbelievers. Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded?” (1 Cor 6:1-7).

This then, appears to be the nature of the offence or trespass dealt with in Matthew 18: personal wrongs committed by a believer in his or her *temporal* dealings with another believer. They are the matters that Paul identifies as *the things pertaining to this life*.

But why does Paul not refer the Corinthians to Matthew 18?

The carnal Corinthians had gone well beyond Matthew 18 by declaring their causes publically, and even going before the heathen courts. It is here as it was in Matthew 5. Taking the matter into the assembly extinguishes the Lord’s intentions and instructions. The Lord anticipates the failure in steps 1-3 noted below. The wronged brother is to regard the unrepentant trespasser as a heathen and publican. He is to “take wrong” and “suffer himself to be defrauded” (1 Cor 6:7).

Six steps of principle in Matthew 18

The Lord’s instructions in Matthew 18 are to ensure that personal wrongs are put right and, that personal matters do not become assembly matters. This may seem strange in the light of verse 17, where we have the Lord’s instruction to “tell it to the church [the local assembly].” However, it is not as it seems as we shall discover. We can identify six steps of principle in the Lord’s instructions in regard to trespass: a *revelation*; a *record*; a *report*; a *rebuke*; a *repentance* and a *reconciliation*.

Step 1: A revelation. Verse 15. “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.”

In contrast to Matthew 5, the *wronged* brother takes the initiative and graciously seeks out the trespasser to reveal his offense. This is not to be done with malice and a desire for retribution, but with the intention

of *reconciliation*. The difference in initiation reflects the distinction between Matthew 5 and Matthew 18. In the former case it was a matter of personal offense and its effect on spiritual relationships. In the later instance it is one of personal trespass and its effect upon earthly relationships, the things pertaining to this life (which have temporal consequences). Because of this difference the sacrifice and altar are not brought into view in Matthew 18.

Step 2: A record. Verse 16: “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.”

The matter is now brought before witnesses for record. Again the trespass is not to be broadcast and the assembly is not involved. If the offender still refuses to hear, then step 3 is to be undertaken.

Step 3: A report. Verse 17: “And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church.”

The first thing to note is that the term church is singular. It is not “tell it to the *churches*.” The idea of the elders of a number of assemblies being called upon to adjudicate is unscriptural. “Is there not a wise man among **you** [the church at Corinth]?” The local assembly has sole and ultimate responsibility in regard to such matters. Second, contrary to expectations the expression “tell it to the church,” does not mean the wrong is announced to the whole assembly. Imagine the disorder and resulting dishonour to the Lord’s house if such matters were made known to all and sundry – to those with little understanding of the scriptures or no knowledge of the associated circumstances.⁶ Neither does it mean telling so called “responsible brethren.” There is no scriptural warrant for “responsible brethren.” The Word of God knows of no such body of men within the local church.

The Lord’s instruction anticipates that the wronged brother informs those who oversee the spiritual welfare of the little flock – the *elders* (Acts 20:28). In this way the matter is kept out of the public arena and prevents a personal matter becoming an assembly issue, with all the potential that would mean for division and disorder.

True, the Lord does not explicitly mention church elders. This is because He is in this instance accentuating the *principle* rather than the *process*. The process we get from His Spirit-inspired apostles in their epistles, which place the responsibility of such matters at the feet of the elders (Acts 20:28).

⁶ For what purpose? We are told by some that the assembly is to “warn and entreat” the wilful trespasser. But who exactly is to compose and deliver the warning and pleading – the entire assembly? A committee? Further, if “tell it to the church” involves the entire gathering, then consistency demands that “neglecting to hear the church” must also refer to the entire gathering. Everyone must sift the evidence to determine “neglect.” Whether or not the pleadings and warnings of the church have been neglected is a matter of *fact*. How is this to be established by the entire congregation? What if they cannot be of one mind? Surely this is not the mind of Christ in regard to local testimony and its government!

However, it would appear that the elders and their representative work (and their plurality) is anticipated in the Lord's statement, that "where two or three are [being] gathered together in [unto] my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Paul's advice to the Corinthians is of help once more. He speaks of their indignity. "If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church. I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren?" (1 Cor 6:4-5). That is, going before the least esteemed among the assembly is better than going before the wisest heathen. So seek out the wise among you for arbitration. Accordingly, the local assembly is the final and sole court in matters of personal trespass.⁷ But what happens if the offender fails to hear the church (the elders)?

Step 4: A rebuke. Verse 17: "If he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican."

If the trespasser fails to hear the church, then a rebuke in the form of a personal judgment is made before the church i.e., the elders, "Let him be unto *thee* as an heathen man and a publican." Once made this judgment is bound on earth and bound in heaven.⁸ The wronged brother withdraws whatever brotherly concessions were in place in his dealings with the trespasser in matters that pertain to this life. He is to transact with the transgressor as he would with a heathen or publican.

Excommunication?

Some believe that in this sad state of affairs excommunication of the trespasser is warranted. This seems inconsistent with the intention of the Lord, which is to keep such matters outside the assembly, noted in the above steps of principle. It is the assembly that "puts away" (1 Cor 5). It is also inconsistent with the nature of the trespass – the things pertaining to this life, which are of no concern to the assembly and, are an unprofitable distraction. The Lord is very specific, "let him be unto **thee** as an heathen man and a publican." The *church* is not to regard the trespasser as such, because personal matters and matters that pertain to this life are not to become church matters.

However, if the matter *is* brought into the assembly and causes disorder, the elders are then required to see to it as a church matter. "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us" (2 Thess 3:6).

⁷ At least "one" would be better than a number of worldly magistrates. Paul speaks argumentatively here and he is not denying the biblical truth that in a multitude of counsellors there is wisdom and, the need for all things to be established in the mouth of two or three witnesses.

⁸ Verse 19 reverts to verse 16 and 18. "Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven."

What the wronged brother must not do.

He must not bring the matter and judgment into the assembly by his words or by his actions. In grace he is not to allow a trespass to affect his spiritual relationship with the trespasser. Impossible we say! It may well be difficult and Scripture declares it so. "A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city: and their contentions are like the bars of a castle" (Pro 18:19). It requires humility and times of bended knee before the Lord. But it is not impossible! Under grace we are exhorted to "suffer wrong." For where sin abounded grace did much more abound (Rom 5:20).⁹

Protests such as avoiding brethren, abstaining from meetings or refusing the emblems, intentionally or unintentionally make a personal matter a public one. They exhibit a carnal spirit and they will inevitably divide the saints and devalue the assembly testimony. May we take note of Paul's warning to the Corinthians. "If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy [i.e., bring his testimony to nothing]; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are" (1 Cor 3:17). "He that covereth a transgression [which requires discerning grace] seeketh [or procures] love; but he that repeateth a matter separateth very friends" (Pro 17:9).¹⁰

Step 5: A repentance. The door to forgiveness and repentance is to be kept open. This is made difficult and sometimes impossible if the trespass is made public and a party spirit arises.

Step 6: A reconciliation. "Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, until seven times: but, until seventy times seven."

Repentance calls for forgiveness, and on *this* ground unlimited forgiveness and reconciliation is available. There can be no forgiveness unless there is repentance. All else is fleshly compromise. We have it in the parallel passage in Luke. "Take heed to yourselves. If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him [i.e., let him be unto thee as a heathen man or publican]; and if he repent, forgive him." And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him. (Luke 17:3-4). We come now to the closing section of this chapter which presents a supporting parable.

The unforgiving servant – the things pertaining to this life

"Then came Peter to Him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven. Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. But

⁹ This of course does not apply to cases where a person is put away from the church (1 Cor 5). There grace is exercised before the act of putting away, where every effort is made to bring the offender into contrition. If the offender remains impenitent, then discipline is enacted and then grace reigns through righteousness.

¹⁰ Let us not contribute to such an action by granting that brother a sympathetic ear, lest we partake of his sin and contribute to calamity.

forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped [besought] him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and **forgave him the debt**. But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellowservants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest. And his fellowservant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt. So when his fellowservants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not everyone his brother their trespasses." (Matt 18:21-35).¹¹

This parable can have a broad and a dispensational interpretation. But there is an immediate and specific application demanded by the word "therefore" in verse 23. It connects the parable with what has been stated concerning the matter of personal trespass. It reverts to Peter's question, "how oft shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?" The Lord says "seventy times seven."¹²

This immediate application is confirmed in the last verse. "So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not everyone his brother their trespasses." We are required to forgive things done against *us*. Only God can forgive things done against *Him*. Failure to forgive is a thing done against God. Observe that in this parable, the Lord presses the need for discerning grace and forgiveness in regard to a trespass – one involving a personal financial debt, the things that pertain to this life. The principle added here, is that we who have received forgiveness and mercy through Christ, are to likewise show mercy to our brethren – indeed, forgive them (v 27). And, as Paul declared to the Corinthians, in Christ-like grace be prepared to "suffer wrong."

Beloved in the Lord, let us be very careful that we do not drive our brethren to prefer a dry morsel in quietness, because we have through our words or ways caused or contributed to a house of strife (Pro 17:1).

¹¹ Notice the Lord does not say "your heavenly Father" in verse 35 as this would not convey the judicial and private nature of the matter c.f. Matt 5:16, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

¹² Seven in biblical numerology is the number associated with "perfection." Peter thought that if he forgave seven times, then that would be grace exercised in all its perfection – he has gone as far as required. But the Lord compounds the number to seven times seventy. Not even Peter would consider counting up to that amount. Forgiveness is unlimited because grace is unlimited.

