

Rise Up And Build

"So They said, 'Let us rise up and build,' Then they set their hands to do this good work," Neh. 2:18

April 11, 2021

Matthew 18:15-17 Applied and Misapplied

*“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 a heathen man and a publican” (Matt. 18:15-17).*

These scriptures are often quoted, seldom applied, and often misapplied. It is vitally important that we know both what **is** taught and what is **not** taught in these verses. In view of the fact that the word “*church*” is mentioned in verse 17, it is evident that these instructions pertain to that period of time when the church is in existence. Students of the Bible recognize that the Lord’s church was established in Jerusalem on the Pentecost following our Lord’s death, burial, and resurrection (Acts 2:1-4,41,47), and that this age will last until the return of the Lord in Judgment (I Cor.15:24-26). We are living in the time period during which the instructions of Matthew 18:15-17 apply and, as members of the church, we are to heed these divine directives. Hence, we **ought** to know. And we **must** know what they teach.

Matthew 18:15-17 Applied

In the first part of this chapter Jesus emphasized the danger, and even the tragedy, of causing someone else to stumble (v. 6,7). And in verse 14 He said, “*it is not the will of our Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.*” If God is concerned about the spiritual security of other saints, then I should also be concerned. I should avoid the personal conduct that might “*offend*” them (cause them to stumble), and I should do what I can lest “*one of these little ones should perish.*” This is the context that is in the background of the Lord’s instructions to those who have been sinned “*against.*” The one who has been sinned “*against*” (Matt. 18:15) is to seek the salvation of

the person who committed the sin. Herein is the most noble way whereby a Christian can “*overcome evil with good*” (Rom. 12:21).

If my brother sins “*against*” me, he also sins against God for, ultimately, every sin is against God (cf. Gen. 39:9). Paul affirmed that “*the wages of sin is death*” (Rom. 6:23), and by this, he meant spiritual death, or separation from God. Hence, when my brother sins “*against*” me, his soul is in jeopardy. My first obligation is not the vindication of self, but rather the salvation of the person who sinned “*against*” me. My primary aim should be to “*gain*” or to save (cf. I Cor. 9:19) my “*brother*.” When a brother has been sinned “*against*,” he must go to the offending “*brother*” and “*tell him his fault*” with a view to saving his soul. This is personal responsibility. “Personal work” is never more personal, nor more needed, than in this area.

What happens if the “*brother*” will not “*hear thee*,” or will not make proper correction? “*Then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.*” Why do this? First, there is the possibility that he will “*hear them*” whereas he refused to “*hear*” you. Secondly, as calm and impartial, but concerned, brethren, they stand a better chance of being heard. And if he refuses to “*hear them*,” they are able to confirm your accusation when you “*tell it unto the church.*” But let us not overlook the fact that the primary purpose in taking “*one or two more*” is that the offender might “*hear them*” (make correction) so that your original purpose in going alone may be realized; namely, that your “*brother*” be “*gained.*”

But what should be done if the offending “*brother*” is too obstinate to “*hear them*?” You have no other scriptural recourse but to “*tell it unto the church.*” But don’t forget: your original purpose has not changed. Whereas he would not “*hear*” you, nor the “*one or two more*,” perhaps he will “*hear*” the church. If so, your purpose has been accomplished; “*thou hast gained thy brother.*” If, however, he “*neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican.*” No longer is he to be treated as a brother in fellowship; He is to be “*unto thee as a heathen man...*” But even in this, the motive is the same. There is still the possibility that this action will yet cause him to “*be ashamed*” (2 Thess. 3:14), and repent. **Gaining** thy brother — not personal vindication—is to become your goal when a “*brother*” sins “*against*” you. Of course, it should be understood that our Lord spoke of the brother who sins against you — not the brother who merely did something that displeased you.

Matthew 18:15-17 Misapplied

In text and context, Matt. 18:15-17 depicts the successive responsibilities of a child of God when he personally has been sinned “*against*” by another “*brother.*” The sin began as a private matter between two individuals, and if the first efforts for correction succeed, the offense would never be made public. These verses, in context, do not relate to publicly committed offenses, either of a moral or doctrinal nature.

However, in today’s world it seems that the moment some false teacher, who has publicly espoused his false doctrine, is publicly reprovved, his sympathizers often will run for the phone, dial the one who reprovved their leader, and rebukingly ask in condescending tones, “did you first go talk to brother ___” before you wrote that article (or preached that sermon)? If he answers “no” he will likely be “told off” and the caller will then hang up before he can explain further. And in the mind of the caller, the false teacher has now become a pious martyr, whereas his rebuker has become an unrighteous hypocrite! And Satan has a field day! It is a mystery to me that a false teacher can use every means of communication available to him to proclaim his heresies, whereas those who combat these heresies with truth, must do all their work in private!

The doctrine of the Pharisees was a matter of public knowledge, and Jesus warned His disciples, saying, “*take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees*” (Matt. 16:6), and then He caused His disciples to understand that He warned them of “*the doctrine of the Pharisees*” (v. 12). Did the Lord violate His Own instructions? Nay, verily! And it is noteworthy that none of His disciples (not even Judas!) condemned Jesus for not first going in private to the Pharisees. Of course, the Pharisees and the Sadducees knew that the Lord stood ready to meet them in person and to combat their heresies with truth. And if any false teacher whom I have marked (Rom. 16:17) wonders if I will personally meet with him, all he has to do is call me and state the time and place.

When Paul wrote the church in Corinth, based on information that had been “*commonly reported,*” he condemned a fornicator and commanded the church to take due action (I Cor. 5). Had he first visited this man in person? No, he publicly dealt with a matter of public record.

In His letter to the church in Thyatira the Lord rebuked the saints there for tolerating the false teacher, called “*that woman Jezebel,*” and He marked the teacher. I do not know who this false teacher was, but you can be sure the members at Thyatira knew. Did the Lord first come back from heaven to have a private visit with this false teacher whose teachings were a matter of public record? No! He knew that what is taught publicly is a matter of public record, is part of the public domain, and is to be dealt with in that fashion.

False teachers, in the spiritual realm are analogous to “carriers” in the medical realm. Let us imagine a “carrier” who has contact with scores of persons. Finally an able doctor learns the identity of the “carrier.” What would you think of the doctor if he only made a private visit to the “carrier,” but never warned the exposed persons of the carrier’s identity, nor of the deadly disease to which they have been exposed? Well, that is what I think of a professed gospel preacher who will not publicly expose false teachers who have publicly proclaimed false doctrine. The one who loves righteousness and hated iniquity (Heb. 1:9) did not intend for Matthew 18:15-17 to be used as a protective shield for false teachers!

—B. Witherington

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