

The Visitor's Pulpit.

A VIOLATED LAW.

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MATT. XVIII, 15-18.

The Jews have a saying that one cause of the ruin of their nation was, no man reproved another.

Persons often when offended become vindictive, and seek to retaliate and injure. Or they get angry and passionately express their displeasure. Or they become morose and reserved, avoiding the offender, or refusing to have any intercourse with him. All this is wrong, and utterly opposed to the requirement before us. And in giving that law, our Lord, I think, laid down a general principle for the reclaiming of offenders, of universal application, exceptions alone excepted. That principle is simply this—first, private and personal labor with the one who has done wrong. In case of failure in bringing him to repentance, as slight a deviation from it as possible that will at the same time permit assistance: "Take with thee one or two" only. And then, third, bringing it before the body having supreme jurisdiction. It is a plan that combines what really is most valuable both in arbitration, and ordinary legal processes for the settlement of difficulties. If this rule, then, were generally observed, how much trouble might be prevented. And, since every man is my brother, who shall say that I am not in all cases bound to put the principle in practice.

But it is especially applicable to the discipline of Christian churches, and it is in this connection that I now propose to consider it:

1. What then does it require?

It demands that when a trespass has been committed by a member of a church, the brother member offended go to the offender. It is natural to say, especially if we have proof, He has done the wrong, let him come to me. But not so says our Lord. He is not likely to come, though it is admitted he is required to:—"Therefore, if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught 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." How blessed for the two to meet half way.

But whatever he may do, you, because supposed to be in the better state of mind, must go. Not send; not write, unless to go is impossible. Then it would be carrying out the spirit of the command, all necessary being as close conformity to it as possible. Your object is to ascertain the facts, and if he is guilty to show or convince him of his fault. Not to criminate, not to upbraid, not to humble him. Not as a preparation for subsequent action. It is nothing less than to gain him, and you should expect and be satisfied with nothing else. Consequently you are not merely required, as we read, to "tell him his fault," but, if necessary, argue the case, and make him see it.

Go "alone." Let no one know of the offence, or of your intention. For if you feel right, you are concerned as well for his reputation as his salvation. He will be more likely to receive admonition if you thus go. He will not be so likely to put himself on the defensive. And he will see that it is interest in him that prompts, and that you have not utterly lost confidence in him, nor deem him beyond hope. And should he either satisfactorily explain, or be won, how great your confusion if you have previously divulged the matter. "Debate thy cause with thy neighbor himself, and discover not a secret to another; lest he that heareth it put thee to shame, and thine infamy turn not away."

And now, in this first step you have more to hope than in any required in case of failure. "A reproof entereth more into a wise man than an hundred stripes into a fool,"—or a wise man either. And if you fail here, the probability is that all subsequent effort, though just as much required, and for the same purpose—will also prove a failure. Therefore be prayerful, earnest and persevering. For if successful, what a gain—to yourself, the cause of religion, and to Christ who sends you! Surely the object is abundantly worth the effort. And this law, so explicit, is binding upon all Christ's followers. Not one is exempt. Not the weakest, nor the least influential,

nor the most unworthy. And its neglect is perpetuating difficulties and wrongs, otherwise easily disposed of, more I think, than any and everything else. It is confessedly opposed to human nature, and therefore self-denying and difficult—perhaps more so than any other work. But this, instead of hindering, should only stimulate us. It is sometimes objected that all this effort is more than the individual is worth. But "take heed that ye despise not one of those little ones," your Father's child, your "brother"! But, you say, it will hurt his feelings, perhaps offend him for me to go to him. But are you sure of this? And even if it should, is not that better than that the weak brother perish? Some think it opposed to a forgiving and loving spirit. But do not all the teachings of the chapter prove the contrary? "If thy brother trespass against thee rebuke him; and if he repent forgive him." These two things then are not incompatible. On the contrary, nothing more shews our love, while it is its neglect that proves the absence of it. "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart; thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor and not suffer sin upon him." "Faithful are the wounds of a friend." But perhaps the most plausible objection, and the one most frequently made, is, our own unworthiness. But even this will not do. "Restore such an one considering thyself lest thou also be tempted." A sense of this should render us cautious and charitable, but it was never intended that it should hinder us.

It is universally admitted, that in all cases of private and personal offence, this is the divine rule. These include all injury done to the person, property, reputation or feelings of a brother, whether real or only supposed, intentional or unintentional. If worth mentioning, or even brooding over and remembering, they are included. And this being the case, we should be exceedingly careful how we either give or take offence, knowing what must follow if the law of Christ is obeyed.

But the point I am seeking to establish is that this rule is of universal application, and capable of being, and intended to be applied to all classes of offence requiring church discipline. Baptist Churches recognized this idea in the mutual pledge of our covenant. In it we give ourselves to one another to watch over each other in the love of God—reproving, rebuking and admonishing one another for good. And we pledge ourselves that if we at any time know that any of the church are guilty of immoral conduct even, we will not expose them by tattling it to others, but will faithfully labor with them according to this direction of our Lord. If then, we adopt this plan in offences which are most open and flagrant, and all agree that we should in those least so, surely there can be no doubt as to those that lie between these extremes. Therefore, "a heretic" for instance, that is, a factious man, a disturber of the church's peace, we can "reject" only after this "first and second admonition." But the Bible, which is our sole authority, has been called a book of principles. Applying this to the case in hand, I do not know that I can better illustrate it than by reference to the only New Testament system of benevolence. The rule given in 1 Cor. xvi. 1, 2, was limited as to time, place and purpose. But the church of today have discovered that, a plan adapted to raise money from Galatians and Corinthians for poor saints at Jerusalem, is found to be perfectly fitted to all circumstances, and the objects we find it necessary to sustain. So, when the experiment is made, lo! this plan of discipline is found suited to all cases, and wherever tried succeeds perfectly.

But I think it can be proved beyond a doubt that this law never was intended to be confined to what are called private offences. For, in the first place, it will not always fully apply to such cases. For instance, slight delinquencies, the result it may be of natural imperfections, which, though persisted in, should not exclude; and personal wrongs, not proved by the "two or three witnesses," can be dealt with no further than the first step, even though that may be utterly fruitless.

And, secondly, offences are so various, and the different classes frequently so blended, that it would be next to impossible to apply it or any law to one class only. For instance, a personal or private offence may be committed very publicly, while a general one, as some would call it, a public offence, may be committed privately and be also personal. Such for example would be the railing and extortion of 1 Cor. v, or any pecuniary difficulty, and even the grossest immoralities and crimes might be of that character. And yet those thus

guilty are in all cases to be put away from the Church and not even to be kept company with "no not to eat." If then this law of Christ is not to govern in all cases, we are placed in this position, that we are compelled to treat the same sin differently entirely, simply because committed in different circumstances or against others that ourselves. That is to say, if the wrong is done to us, we have a specific law to guide us, but if against another, even God himself, is indifferent as to how we treat it, and has left us solely to the guidance of varied and defective human judgment or mere caprice. And further, if the sin is committed against us, it matters not how gross it may be, according to such teaching, we cannot expose it and have the offender brought to justice if he "hear" us; while according to other requirements of Scripture, such offences always demand separation from the church even though followed by repentance. But the objection to the view I am advancing turns chiefly upon the force of the expression "against thee." Now to this there are two answers, either of which, it seems to me, is sufficient. In the first place there is nothing in the text or context to indicate that the "thee" is at all emphatic, and that mere personal offences are intended. Instead, the general scope of the passage would indicate the contrary. It is the good of the individual that is to be sought rather than personal satisfaction for wrong done to us. But waiving this, there is a sense in which every church offence is a wrong committed against each individual member. This is true of all immoralities, departures from the truth and withdrawals from fellowship. "If one member suffer, all the members suffer with it." How is it that we to such a degree fail to realize this?

But in the second place, the words "against thee" are put in brackets in Dean Alford's version, and he tells us that they are altogether wanting in the two oldest manuscripts of the original. This being the case, instead of these words being so emphatic that the interpretation of the whole passage must turn upon them, we may correctly read—"But if thy brother shall trespass, go and show him his fault," etc. As to the passage similar in Luke xvii. 3, I find there is no authority whatever for "against thee," the correct reading being "If thy brother trespass rebuke him." But two or three additional objections have weight with many against all application of the passage to any but personal and private offences. It is said, if the offence is public it cannot be settled privately, and therefore this law has no force in such cases. I reply, your work is not done until the offender is gained, and he must prove that he has been by willingness to do all that is requisite. Public offences require acknowledgments just as public, and some sins, as we have already intimated, are of such a character, that even confession and repentance do not absolve the church from the necessity, for the good of the cause, and the honor of religion, of separating the offender, at least for a time, from membership. But the duty of the person going is to explain this, and not rest until the offender is perfectly willing to do and submit to everything necessary. But it is further objected that in some cases this law cannot be carried out. The transgressor may, for instance, be beyond your reach. But God never requires impossibilities. The dying thief was absolved from the baptismal obligation, bind upon all believers. The Christian in compulsory solitude, or away from the church and its privileges, is not bound by the requirement, "This do in remembrance of Me." And so, if distance or any circumstance renders literal obedience to any part of this requirement impossible, why, all that is left is the nearest approach that is possible. If we cannot go we can write. And where neither is possible, and the church has a duty to perform, it must not be neglected because the individual duty cannot be done. Beside, as we have already shewn, this is chiefly the laying down of a principle, which we adopt by conforming to the letter of the law as closely as the circumstances render possible, remembering that the exceptions may even go to prove the rule. As to any objections based upon personal or wordly interests, they are unworthy of notice.

And now, observe! There is no law given in the New Testament with more explicitness and fullness, not even the commands relating to the ordinances. Does it not seem most unlikely that there should be such a law for personal offences only, when in the case of others just as numerous, just as injurious, and just as difficult to manage, we should have no rule what-

ever? To suppose this seems to me such a reflection upon the Divine wisdom as none should accept unless compelled to.

But above all let it be borne in mind that just such a course as we are recommending is the express and repeated requirements of all the word of God, "If thy brother trespass rebuke him"; "Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them"; "Exhort one another daily"; "Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly"; "As also saith the law"—"Thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him." So that taking the view of this passage I am presenting, is only making it confirm the plain and explicit teachings of the rest of Scripture, and rendering more clear and building an obligation from which in any case we can by no possibility escape.

[Conclusion next week.]

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