

## **The Church and the Court**

*The beginning of strife is as when one letteth out water: therefore leave off contention, before it be meddled with.*

Proverbs 17:14

Strife and contention are always going to be a part of the devil's world, but is part of our Christian testimony to end contention. This is a testimony to the world that the greater one, the Holy Spirit, truly does live in us. We are different than the world, different because we have power over Satan's devices, including strife.

Solomon said in this verse that strife is like a small stream of water. When left to itself, it will grow like a crack in a dam and eventually burst, drowning those involved. Strife begins small and ends up bigger than all of the people it affects. We are told in this verse to stop it as soon as possible and not to meddle with it. Strife and contention when meddled with, grow into consuming monsters.

*It is an honor for a man to cease from strife: but every fool will be meddling.*

Proverbs 20:3

It is more honorable for us to work at settling strife than to force a showdown. God's Word calls a person a *fool*/who must contend and prove his side of an issue. You will also find that once you go about to prove your innocence or another's guilt, it will never end. There are more issues in life than hours in the day. This becomes Satan's means of side-tracking the believer from the real issue of life, *winning souls for the kingdom of God*.

Our lifestyle before the world is part of our witness to them. To cease from strife by the ability of the Holy Spirit within us tells the world of a power they do not possess. It is then up to us to tell them how to become part of God's family and possess the same power. If we settle disputes the same way they do, we are no better nor more

powerful than they are. Instead of showing how they can become as we are, we become as one of them, a fool.

*Go not forth hastily to strive, lest thou know not what to do in the end thereof, when thy neighbor hath put thee to shame. Debate thy cause with thy neighbor himself; and discover (reveal) not a secret to another; Lest he that heareth it put thee to shame, and thine infamy turn not away.*

#### Proverbs 25:8-10

I like to call this verse “running off half-cocked”. A gun that is half cocked is dangerous. One small touch of the trigger can cause an injury or death. A person who runs off in anger after receiving only a small amount of information is “running off half-cocked”. He can cause great injury to a friendship which can never be corrected. This person is usually put to shame and looks stupid in the end, when he finally discovers all of the facts.

Verse 8 shows us how not to handle strife, and verse 9 tells us how we are to handle it. In the Old and New Testaments God tells us that we are to settle our differences between ourselves, especially when the dispute is between believers. The two parties involved should come to terms, and the fewer who know about the situation the better. When whispering and gossip develop before those in conflict have time to discuss the matter, shame and embarrassment will always be the outcome. In other words, God is telling us: *the fewer involved in settling the strife the better.*

With the much publicized court case of Jimmy Swaggart and Marvin Gorman, the old question arises, “When should Christians go to Court?” More and more church matters and many local church members are ending up with their futures in the hands of attorneys, judges and juries. Is this right? Can the world really solve church issues? Let’s see what Jesus has to say in Matthew 18:15-18.

*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. (vs. 15)*

In this passage of scripture, Jesus says the same thing Solomon told us in Proverbs. Strife should be handled first between the two involved. Jesus tells us that the most important thing is not who is right or wrong, but that peace be kept between brothers and sisters in the family of God. In other words, gaining your brother is more important than winning an argument.

*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. (vs. 16)*

The “one or two” are to be impartial and not to be used to prove to one the innocence or truth of the other. As impartial observers and hearers, they can make an objective and prayerful decision. Again, the desired result is the gaining of the brother. Settling of strife is the honorable conclusion God is looking for.

When issues are settled behind closed doors, the first benefit is to the local body of believers. Because little or nothing is known by others, gossip and discord cannot begin. The next benefit is toward unbelievers. Because strife is not seen, the issue of the gospel can be kept clearly before them, even by those believers who at one time had contention between themselves.

The Holy Spirit is involved in the private settling of strife and in the public declaration of the gospel. When strife and contention become manifested before the world, the issue of the gospel is lost behind a smoke screen of accusations. The press sensationalizes the issue, and the church ends up looking no better than the world they are trying to evangelize. We are to go into all the world to preach the gospel, but into the closet to settle our differences.

*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. (vs. 17)*

The Lord commands that the leadership of the local church is the final court for the believer. We are not told to go to an earthly courtroom if the church does not give us satisfaction. After the church elders meet behind closed doors, if the issue is not resolved, the one who will not take counsel is not to be sued, but to be treated as an

unbeliever. In other words, *you do not have close fellowship with them anymore*. Just as fellowship is very limited with an unbeliever, so it is with the believer who will not resolve strife. He should be prayed for and loved, *but from a distance*. Once the decision is made by the church leadership, God stands behind it.

*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. (vs. 18)*

This cannot be separated from the passage before it. God stands behind the decision made by the church leaders. Whatever is loosed or bound by the pastor and church elders is accordingly loosed and bound by God in Heaven. The local church is God's supreme court between believers. It is the largest closet God provides for church matters to be settled in. To take our matters before the world only clouds the issue of the gospel.

Marvin Gorman may walk away from the court battle with ten million dollars, but he has lost something money cannot buy, *his credibility as a minister of the gospel*. There are some things money just cannot buy. Who is going to listen to him preach the gospel when this case is finally over? It is better to lose natural things and preserve eternal things. The ten million dollars in this case has no eternal value, and it will not buy one soul on this earth.

*By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.*

John 13:35

The believer who goes against another believer in the courts of the world may win there, but he will lose in heaven. He may win his case, but will lose his testimony, honor and integrity before the world. The believer who abides by God's Word and ends up before the church leadership may lose there, but he will win in heaven. He may lose his case, but he will keep a brother and preserve his ministry in the world as well. Even if the church leadership misunderstands his side of the case, and he feels he

has been misjudged, God is his true judge and He will defend and avenge (Romans 12:19).

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