

Rightly Dividing Truth

By way of a change, I'd like to have a lesson in Bible Study today. In so doing, I want to establish some fundamentals of studying God's Word to help make your study of God's Word more effective.

Oftentimes I find that people just READ God's Word. There is a certain efficacy in reading God's Word and being aware of what is in it, but ultimately speaking, each and every one of us has to INTERACT with God's Word. We have to start to dig, and understand in detail what God is addressing to us. We have to start to really STUDY God's Word.

In the process of this, I would like to examine a Scripture that, from time to time, is taken out of context and misapplied. I would like to apply some of the fundamentals of Bible Study to this Scripture, to help us understand it a little more fully, and a little more completely.

The Scripture is:

Matthew 18: 15 (New King James Version) "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.

16 "But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.'

17 "And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.

This Scripture causes problems for people. Some people try and use it as a defence from time to time, or they misapply it. People question WHEN this particular procedure is to be applied.

(1) Read different translations

What is the first fundamental in terms of Bible Study? Where do we start? For me, the very first rule of Bible Study is to read in different translations. There's no substitute for being able to understand what the Scripture is saying than reading in different translations.

None of us are fluent in the biblical languages. We are not skilled translators of the text. We don't have the opportunity of going back and reading the original Hebrew or Greek. So we can't work out for ourselves what the original text says. We are dependent upon translators, and it is very important for us to be aware of what other translators say. Different translators approach the text from different viewpoints and from different methods.

I would say that it is wise to use both older and more recent translations. Some people dislike more recent translations -- and sometimes for very good reasons. But there is a major difference between most modern translations and older translations such as the King James Version.

The King James Version is a LITERAL translation of the Greek or the Hebrew text. It means that the translators took each word and tried to translate each word exactly. Unfortunately, if you do that, you end up with a very wooden, difficult translation that, at times, becomes hard to understand.

More modern translators have used what is known as a dynamic translation whereby they seek to understand what the Bible is trying to say in a particular passage. How do these words inter-relate? While it can create problems in some areas, it also helps very much in other areas.

So in terms of reading the Bible, it is wise to read and be able to use a variety of translations.

So, from my perspective, the first rule of Bible Study is to use a variety of translations because when you read a variety of translations, you will become aware of where the translators have a problem with the text, and where they come up with all sorts of different conclusions.

A classic case of that is in 1st Samuel 13:1. If you look at a variety of translations, you can see that the translators are all over the place, because none of them really understand what this text is talking about:

1 Samuel 13: 1 (New King James Version) Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel,

1 Samuel 13: 1 (New International Version) Saul was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned over Israel for forty-two years.

As we have said in the past, don't base a doctrine upon a difficult Scripture! If translators have difficulty translating a Scripture it is not one to base a doctrine upon. So use a variety of translations. It's very handy in working out where the translators have difficulties working with the text.

And, above all else, be aware of the theological BIAS of the translators. A few years back we went through a phase where people considered that the King James Version was the "inspired, 'thus saith the Eternal' Bible, that in fact, it wasn't really written in Hebrew or Greek; it was written in King James English."

No!

It was translated under the order of King James by a number of men who had particular theological BIASES. They had recently come out of the Roman Catholic Church. They wanted to establish the ascendancy of the English Church, or the Scottish Church as the case may be, or various forms of churches. To a certain extent, their own doctrinal presuppositions, their theological biases come through in the translation.

Notice one of their theological biases:

1 John 5: 7 For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one.

They believed in the trinity, therefore they had no scruples about putting something in the text that was not in the original.

One needs to be aware of the theological biases of the translators.

Matthew 18: 15 (King James Version) Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee ...

What does it mean to trespass? What is a trespass?

Notice a more modern translation, the New Revised Standard Version says:

Matthew 18: 15 "If another member of the church sins against you ...

So it is talking about sin.

Young's Literal translation, from the latter part of the 19th century, says:

Matthew 18: 15 'And if thy brother may sin against thee ...

He understood the word to be sin.

The American Standard Version (a 20th century translation) states:

Matthew 18: 15 And if thy brother sin against thee ...

The King James Version uses the word "trespass," but there is a preponderance of translations which translate the word as "sin."

(2) Understand Key Words

That leads us to rule number 2, which is to understand the key words. Ask, what is really being discussed? What is the subject matter here?

In the above Scripture, what are we talking about? Trespass or sin? What is the word, and what does it mean?

If you go to a concordance and look at the word (not Cruden's concordance, but one like Strong's or Young's Analytical Concordance which provide some interface between the original language and the English that is used) you'll find that the Greek word is "hamartano." In the King James Version "hamartano" is used some 43 times. It is translated as "sin" 38 times. Only 3 times is it translated "trespass." It is translated "offend" on one occasion, and "for your faults" on another. That is how the word is used.

With a concordance you can also find out the context in which the usages occur. This is easy with a computer concordance, but it is also possible with Strong's and Young's concordances. In years past, Strong's became the favoured concordance in the Church of God. All you need to do is to look to the right of the word you are examining, and you'll find a number which is cross referenced in the lexicon at the back of the book. If you go to that number in the back of the book, you will find that it lists "sin, trespass, offend, for your faults." It won't tell you the number of times they are used. You would have to go back to those words in the earlier part of the book and count up the number of times it occurs. It takes a bit longer to do, but you can find it out.

Young's Concordance is a little more useful because Young will actually give you this type of material in the back of his lexicon. So you can actually find it out even if you aren't into the computer age. We are not talking about computer-aided Bible Study! These things are available to any of us with a proper concordance.

So the overwhelming usage of this word is "sin." The modern translators have more appropriately translated it as "sin" as opposed to "trespass." At this point in time, we don't need to get into why, in the 1600s the King James translators decided to use the word, "trespass" as opposed to the word, "sin."

If we look at the other uses of the word "trespass" in the New Testament we find:

Luke 17: 3 (King James Version) Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him.

4 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.

This is Luke's parallel of what we are reading in Matthew 18. You might say that the only time this word is translated as "trespass" in the New Testament is in this environment. So being aware of the word, and being aware of the intensity of the word becomes very important.

The word "hamartano" really means "TO MISS THE MARK." That is the underlying meaning of the word. When we miss the mark that God has set, we sin! That's really what sin is. We don't live up to the standard that God has required. So we summarise that concept into a little 3-letter word called "sin" -- missing the mark.

What is the 3rd rule we need to look at?

(3) What is the context?

What is the context of the verse? What is the context of the chapter? And what is the context of the book?

What is the context of God's Word? How does this verse fit into the overall plan of God?

What is the context that we are dealing with here in Matthew 18?

Let's start at the beginning of Matthew 18:

Matthew 18: 1 At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

2 And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them,

3 And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

4 Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

5 And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.

6 But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.

In the King James Version it goes on to talk about offending people, especially offending little ones. What does the word "offend" mean in this Scripture?

Rule 2! This becomes very, very important. Many times I have heard where people have read Matthew 18:15 as, "*If your brother offend you ...*"

Is that what it is really saying? What does "offend" mean in the Scriptures? It's important to understand because people oftentimes see this reference to "offend" as having an application to Matthew 18:15. It does, but not in the way most people think it should do.

If you take a dictionary and you look at the uses of the word "offend" you will find that there are something like 6 different usages. Only 1 of those 6 different usages has an application to the way in which the word "offend" is used in the Bible. Only 1!

If someone steps on your toes, you may get offended. But it may have been a pure accident. When someone rushes into Services and doesn't say, "*Hello*" to someone, that person may get offended.

Is that what the Bible is talking about here in terms of offending someone? The person may have had the opening prayer on their mind. Or maybe they were song-leading and they were trying to get in touch with the pianist and their mind was very focused upon a particular thing, and they ignored you; "*and they never ignore me. I'm offended.*"

Dear, dear! We have to get over it!

What's the biblical use of the word, "offend"? How does the Bible use this term? It comes from a Greek word, "skandalizo" which is from a word which you may recognise, "*to scandalise.*" How do you go about "scandalising" another person? That's not necessarily what we are talking about here, but you can appreciate that we are talking about something that is befitting a scandal -- not just stepping on someone's toes, or failing to recognise someone when you are in a race to do something else.

Skandalizo is a verb that is used in the King James Version some 30 times. It is translated "offend" 28 times, and "make to offend" twice. The King James translation uses this word "offend" quite frequently.

If you take a sizeable dictionary, one that breaks down the usages, you'll find that we have some 6 different usages for "offend" today. Only the last one that was mentioned in the dictionary that I referred to is the one that relates to the Bible. We have all sorts of other usages. So you have to make sure that your understanding of the word "offend" agrees with the biblical usage of the word.

Skandalizo is derived from a noun "skandalon" which is used 15 times in the Authorised Version. It is translated:

- "offence" 9 times,
- "stumbling block" 3 times,
- "occasion of stumbling" once,
- "occasion to fall" once,
- "thing that offends" once.

Perhaps a stumbling block is a more appropriate way of understanding it.

Let's have a look at a particular Scripture that helps us understand the application of "offend" in Scripture.

Paul wrote to the Church in Rome about being careful how we treat one another, especially those who are weak in the faith. We are told to be very careful about that.

Romans 14: 19 Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.

20 For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence.

That word "offence" is not from the same root as "skandalon." It's from another Greek word altogether. Such are the vagaries of the English language!

21 It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak.

Paul is talking here about a brother being caused to be made weak, or caused to stumble. It's something in the context of that.

Rather interestingly, Jesus Christ used the same word in the parable of the sower. That which grew among stony ground and had no root of itself, was soon "offended." It was soon given over to something else.

22 Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.

Our responsibility is to be concerned about the well-being of others, especially those who are new or weak in the faith. We may be able to do all sorts of things, but Paul said, *"Take heed, be careful that you don't cause a brother to stumble, be offended, or become even weaker in the faith."*

What is the biblical application of offend? It is causing another person to sin, or leading another person into sin. Because Jesus Christ didn't measure up to the religious people's opinion of that day, His own words led them deeper into their own sin -- because they rejected Him. They became offended at His words. They rejected them. They had a mark to live up to, and they failed to do so. They set their chins and jaws against it and said, *"I will not do what God says. I will not heed the teaching of God's Word. I will listen to my own interpretation of God's Word."*

So even the words of Jesus Christ led some people who were set upon sin, deeper into their own sins.

It aligns with the Greek usage of entrapment, or causing to stumble. So when we talk about offend, we are talking about seeking to trap another person, or causing to put something in their path to cause them to trip up and stumble. That is why, in some places, we find the word translated as a stumbling block.

Offend does not mean a polite stepping on the toes, or, *"What you said just offended me. I take offence at it."* It's not just causing upset or anything of that nature. It is, in fact, the leading of a person into sin.

So the context of the first part of Matthew 18 is causing others to sin. I have the New King James with me and I have been doing a little bit of switching backwards and forwards between the New King James and the Old King James English. In the New King James it says:

Matthew 18: 6 "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin ...

That is a better translation of the word. It's not just offend in any particular way. It is to sin. So the context of Matthew 18 firstly is of causing other people to sin. It then turns and looks to the other side of the coin in verse 15 -- being sinned against. In fact the whole remainder of the chapter talks about being sinned against and how you respond to that. Verses 21 to 35 deals with the handling of those who sin, the restoration, and above all else, forgiveness. So the whole context of Matthew 18 is of sin: the importance of avoiding it, and how to handle sin when it arises.

Matthew 18:15 is set in the context of handling sin. It's not about personality. Sometimes someone says, *"Your personality offends me."* Well some people's personality can be offensive. But at times we also fall into the trap of wanting to make everybody's personality just like our own. God is not interested in just one personality type. He is interested in a variety of personalities.

Yes, personality misused, can be sin. But personality, by itself, is not sin.

Some people have personality quirks. We might consider them to be shortcomings. They are not a cause for applying Matthew 18:15 to. We may need to help them. We may need to help strengthen them and build them up. We may need to help them overcome their personality quirks or shortcomings. Some people need to be helped to curb their personality.

Personality by itself is not sin, but it can be used for sin.

It's not about tastes and customs. Matthew 18:15 is purely about one thing. It's about sin. It's not about likes and dislikes. It's about what God labels as sin.

So what is the purpose of Matthew 18:15-20? Clearly, the purpose is to win a brother back from sin -- how to go about helping someone who finds themselves in a situation of sin.

Jesus Christ made it abundantly clear in verse 11:

11 "For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.

That was His purpose. That is also our purpose! That's why we are part of God's Church. That's why we are part of a community, to help where we can. We are our brother's keeper.

If we go back to the New Revised Standard Version it says:

Matthew 18: 15 "If another member of the church sins against you ...

We are not out down the road finding some old drunk and telling him he is a sinner, and that unless he repents of it, we are going to bring witnesses against him, and we are going to throw him out! Throw him out of what?

No, we are our brother's keeper, our sister's keeper. We are one another's keeper. We have a responsibility one to another, to be concerned about one another.

Correction is one of the most feared things out. People don't like correction. It's perhaps the hardest concept for a human being to accept. Who likes correction? Everyone wants to be validated. They want to be built up. They want to be patted on the back.

If there is something wrong, they want to pass the buck. They want to put the blame onto someone or something else. *"It's not my fault! I was born this way! I can't help it. Blame my parents. Blame their parents before them. Blame the rest of the world, but not me."*

People don't like to be corrected. They want to be validated, and they want to be built up.

It is a very difficult concept for human beings to accept that they may be wrong. Yet God's Word speaks at length about the need for correction.

Hebrews 12 talks about how God chastises every son whom He loves. If we are not with chastisement, then we are a bastard. We are outside the family. We are not part of the family.

Why? Why does God do it? For a great purpose, as we will see.

***Proverbs 15: 5 A fool despises his father's instruction,
But he who receives correction is prudent.***

He is a wise person, a person who can listen to correction. Sometimes it is wise to listen to correction even when it is NOT even justified or warranted, because it may also provide some insights as to how other people see us. And unwittingly, they may provide us with a little bit of wisdom amongst their foolishness.

Solomon understood the difference; fools on one hand, and prudent or wise on the other. There are very few wise people in the world, very few.

Psalms 141: 5 Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head ...

Why would David say, "Let the righteous smite me?" Because it was for his benefit. He understood that if a righteous person smote him, or hit him, it was for his benefit. It would be a kindness to him. He knew that it would help him. He said, "Let him reprove me. It will be an excellent oil."

What was the use of oil? Oil was a point of anointing, blessing, setting apart. He said it was not going to break his head. He said it was an oil that was going to be beneficial to him.

What did the Good Samaritan do? He poured oil and wine on the man's wound. Oil was used for helping the healing process. So David, the psalmist, recognised that if a righteous person came along and corrected him, it would be for his healing. It would be for his betterment.

He continues:

5 ... for yet my prayer also shall be in their calamities.

What does he mean by that? Once again, read some different translations. Let's read it from the Tanakh, the Jewish translation:

Psalms 141: 5 Let the righteous man (singular) smite me in loyalty. Let him reprove me. Let my head not refuse such choice oil ...

He saw the words of correction from a righteous individual as being like the oil of God, a blessing of God.

5 ... my prayers are still against their evil deeds.

Subtle! You see, the "righteous man" is in the singular. "Their evil deeds" are in the plural. Who do the evil deeds relate to? They relate to the evil doers in verse 4:

***4 Do not incline my heart to any evil thing,
To practice wicked works
With men who work iniquity;
And do not let me eat of their delicacies.***

Once again, here is a case where a different translation sorts out even the grammar, so that you can understand it grammatically a little bit more effectively.

So the prayers are against the evil doers who, in verse 4, were plural. The righteous man, on the other hand, is going to do a blessing to him.

Once again, this is the benefit of reading different translations, being able to see the emphasis upon the grammar. Correction, if it is godly, is a blessing. Blessings lead to the healing of the individual. Something is added to us. We are built up. We are strengthened. We are enhanced.

It's an example of caring on the part of the person who corrects. God's chastisement or correction of us is an aspect of caring for us. He wants to add to us. He wants us to be able to see this world from His perspective, not from a human perspective.

It's a matter of being concerned about our well-being. Above all else, you might say that it's about our peace. The word "peace" (shalom) relates to well-being.

When we are corrected, can we see correction from the point of view of someone caring for us, someone wanting to add to us, somebody concerned about our well-being, our peace?

On the other hand, human reactions are normally a challenge: *"What do you mean trying to tell me this?"*

Why do people react as a challenge? Because they see they are losing something. They may be losing their power or control to somebody else, and they don't want to be under somebody else. Maybe somebody is trying to gain control over them. They see themselves losing something, losing self respect, losing power or control over themselves. The normal reaction is a fight. They get very combative. That is a very normal human reaction.

But God wants to correct us to benefit us, not to lessen us.

(4) Look for previous allusions or references to what is being said

Look for the lessons that we can learn. Read through a section of Scripture and ask, what are the allusions or the references to what has already been said, in God's Word?

What is Christ referring to in this particular case? Is He saying something entirely new? Or is He using something that has been said before?

We may have read the Bible several times, but we don't know everything in it! In Christ's day, people had listened to God's Word. If they had gone to school they would have learned to read God's Word. Many people, especially if they consider themselves educated, would have a very great knowledge of the content of God's Word.

Someone like the apostle Paul was able to quote large sections of the Scriptures verbatim from memory. People's minds were exercised in a different way in those days, because they didn't have the Book.

Maybe we don't bother reading it and remembering it because we rely on a concordance or a computer, or two dozen different translations on our bookshelf or on our computer. We don't remember it in the same way, yet there is a great benefit of being aware of what is in God's Word, so that we can make those relationships.

The problem is, too many people read a Scripture in isolation. It remains in isolation to them because they do not understand the Word of God.

I recently went to a seminar on the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). The person giving the seminar, who has spent his life studying the gospels, really had no idea of what the apostle Paul said! His life was so focused on Matthew, Mark and Luke that he didn't really hear what the rest of the New Testament said. Granted, in many ways, he did have a very good understanding of the Old Testament.

It is surprising how people, even though they live their lives studying God's Word scholastically, don't understand what God's Word says as a whole!

You and I are called to understand God's Word holistically -- as a whole, not just as a part. That is why, in sermons, we tend to jump all over the place throughout God's Word, because the teaching has to be consistent throughout God's Word.

So when you are studying God's Word, it is well worthwhile asking yourself, "What are the allusions or references from other parts of God's Word that are being referred to here?" I say "allusions" because the Bible doesn't always say, *"Thus saith the Eternal."* It may allude to something that has already been said without stating it. Once again, with the people in the time of Christ, with their knowledge of God's Word, allusions were no trouble to them. They knew what God's Word said.

The particular man I just mentioned had no problem whatsoever applying Isaiah 14:12 and Ezekiel 28:12 to Satan. People in most of Christendom, and many scholastics, would reject that and say: *"No, it is talking about the King of Babylon. It is talking about the King of Tyre."*

But for this particular man, having been schooled in the Old Testament, and in the processes of the 1st century, it was no problem when Christ said that He saw Satan fall from heaven. Immediately two references came to his mind -- Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28.

So it is worthwhile being aware of what God has already said on a matter, and being biblically literate.

How do we go about that? Here's one little tool that you can use: Tory's Treasury of Scriptural Knowledge. You may find one in a second hand book store, and if you have a computer, you can also buy it electronically. It's a useful little book because it's got somewhere in excess of 500,000 cross references throughout God's Word. Is it complete? Are they all valid? No, but it is a start. It can be very helpful in being aware of other relevant sections of Scripture.

Sometimes it is worthwhile taking the words that Christ is saying, and looking them up in a concordance. For instance you may look up the words in a concordance relating to sight, to seeing and blindness and all the synonyms, and see if there are other references to which Christ may be referring. Then your understanding will be enhanced and developed.

Why is it important? Well, in Matthew 18:16 it comes to the aspect of witnesses.

Matthew 18: 16 "But if he will not hear (if he won't hear you, if he won't accept the correction, if he rejects what you say), take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.'

What are they witnesses to? Why are they needed? I've been in a situation that I was called into, where I asked who the other people in the room were.

"They are witnesses."

"Did they witness the problem between the two of you?"

"No."

"Well, why are they here?"

"They are witnessing me telling the other person what I think of them."

Is that what Jesus Christ is referring to? Is that what God intended, in terms of a witness? No! Not at all.

You could come to that conclusion if all you know is Matthew 18. But Jesus Christ is speaking about something else:

Deuteronomy 19: 15 "One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits ...

You don't have a one on one situation, drag them down and punch it out. You don't have a brawl.

15 ... by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established.

So if you convey a point to another person, you had better make sure there are witnesses to that. The witness must be witnesses to the sin. It's a very important point.

God's Law says that one witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity or sin that he sins. It's got to be at the mouth of two or three witnesses that something is established. That is what Jesus Christ is talking about in Matthew chapter 18. The witnesses are witnesses to the fact of what happened, of the sin that was committed, or the sin that is still being committed.

What if there are no witnesses? There is such a thing as patience!

There is also some more instruction in Deuteronomy. Because although you cannot have a one on one situation, you can, if you have a disagreement over a matter, do something with it. It is expressed in terms of a false witness. That of course is a more grievous situation, but the application is equally true in terms of a true witness. The converse holds true for a just witness, or a true witness.

If your brother won't accept your approach, bring the matter to those in charge.

Deuteronomy 19: 16 "If a false witness rises against any man to testify against him of wrongdoing,

17 "then both men in the controversy shall stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who serve in those days.

18 "And the judges shall make careful inquiry, and indeed, if the witness is a false witness, who has testified falsely against his brother,

19 "then you shall do to him as he thought to have done to his brother ...

If he was a false witness, and he was seeking to get some advantage over his brother, maybe even wanting to get his brother put to death (because that's the application or principle usage of false witnesses in the Old Testament), the Bible says then he gets put to death.

But, as I said, the converse is true for a true witness. If your brother won't accept you, then you have a responsibility. You can take the matter to those who are in charge. What is he talking about? He talks about the priests, the judges and, you might say, the ministry today. The matter can be taken to the ministry.

What are the ministry to do? They have got to make careful enquiry. It's not just a matter of one person's word against another's. It's a matter of a very careful enquiry.

If the witness is false, or if the witness is true, then sentence has to be passed accordingly. Sometimes that careful enquiry can take a very long period of time. One case that I was involved in took some 8 years to get to the bottom of it. Not that I didn't know the conclusion of the matter from the beginning, but it took 8 years to have the evidence that was necessary to say, "Such and such is the case." (Of course I wasn't working all of the 8 years to find the evidence!)

As I said earlier on, sometimes patience is essential as well, and it is surprising the way in which the Eternal allows things to come out.

Numbers 32: 23 ... be sure your sin will find you out.

They will! You don't get away with things forever. Correction is going to come for it, sooner or later. We think we might be able to dust something under the mat. If God is working with us, if God is seeking to bring us to perfection, it's going to be evident.

So we bring the matter to those people, and we leave it with them. It's then theirs. The end result of the whole process in both Deuteronomy and Matthew is to put evil out of the community. There is no place in God's community for evil, for sin.

In Deuteronomy it is expressed in terms of a false witness. Being a false witness is a sin, as are many other things, where we fail to reach the mark that God has established for us.

Put evil out of the community.

Deuteronomy 19: 19 ... so you shall put away the evil from among you.

Put it away from you.

Matthew 18: 17 ... let him be unto thee as an heathen man (a Gentile) and a publican.

If somebody won't accept the instruction they are outside the Church. They are not part of the fellowship. And it is for sin -- not for one of the myriad ways we use the word "offend" today, or some other quirk that we may want to rail against another person.

What is the flow on from this? Matthew 18 talks about how the matter was to be handled. If they would not hear the witnesses you took, witnesses who were witnesses to the fact, it was to be taken to the Church.

Who was he talking about in terms of the Church? At times, people have thought of it in terms of somebody getting up from the pulpit and saying, *"We have this problem with so and so. We've been to him about it, and he refuses to accept it. Unless he is prepared to accept it right now, I am going to tell you exactly what it is."*

Not at all! When he talks about telling it to the Church, he is talking about telling it to the leaders of the Church, those who have the power in the Church to remove someone from the community of the Church. That's the purpose of it.

If he refuses to hear the Church, if he refuses to hear the leadership of the Church, then he is outside the Church.

Interestingly, the next verse talks about binding and loosing. What's the binding and loosing in context of? At times people can get themselves into a stew over these verses. He is talking about what he has already been talking about -- about sin, and about whether a person should remain as part of the community or not.

The power of the two or three witnesses are able to bind a decision that this person was in sin, upon that person. Something is not just established in the mouth of one witness. It is by the mouths of two or three witnesses, or by extension, by the careful investigation of those who have the responsibility to establish the true facts.

18 "Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

19 "Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven.

20 "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."

This binding and loosing is based upon the diligent enquiry, and upon witnesses. *"The two or three gathered in My name,"* is a reference to whom? Those making the diligent enquiry, the witnesses.

What is the flow on from this? Is this really the basis for a "house" Church, or the "living room" Church of God? *"Where two or three are gathered in My name, there I am in the midst."*

Well, I guess there would be circumstances in which God would be in the midst of two or three people who are gathered together in his name on the Sabbath Day, because that is all that is available to them. That is possible.

But it's not a justification for the optimum size of Sabbath Services. That's not the basis at all!

The minimum size of Sabbath Services that the apostles probably had in mind, was 10. That was the minimum in the synagogue. You couldn't start Services or have prayers to begin, unless there were 10 men present. So if you had asked Peter or Paul for the number to make a Church, their reflex reaction would probably have been 10. That is what they would have grown up with.

So Matthew 18:20 is not a justification for the "living room" Church of God, or justification for any other application. Jesus Christ is talking about the whole process of putting sin out of the Body, of cleansing the Body.

Let's summarise the fundamentals:

Read a variety of translations. It will help clarify what it is you are reading about. If it confuses, it tells you that the translators don't really understand what they are translating! Sometimes those Scriptures have to be put on the back burner for a while until something else arises that clarifies it. You might have a list of Scriptures for which you have questions, Scriptures that you don't understand. Don't create some theology of your own to try and make sense of it. Put it on the back burner. Put it in the back of your Bible, and wait. You might find some other Scripture that then gives understanding to it. You may find some other application.

Read a variety of translations. They can help with the grammar as well. They can help with the tense of what is being conveyed.

Seek understanding of the key words. You might say we have done that in a couple of references today in terms of the word that is translated "trespass" and the word that is translated "offend." The interesting aspect is, they both come down to sin, common ordinary sin. Obviously they are nuanced in some way, but they still amount to sin.

Study the context. Understand the context. Understand the context of the verse, of the section of Scripture, of the chapter, even the book or books as the case may be. Understand the context.

Above all else, understand the context of God's Word as a whole. Be holistic!

If you are reading something in the gospels, as we have today, it is always worthwhile to use the other gospels. If you have access to a Harmony of the Gospels, that is a great tool in terms of studying the gospels because you can read how the other gospel writers recorded that event. You can see emphases that may have been made in one gospel as opposed to another. As you might have seen earlier, Matthew puts a lot more emphasis upon this topic than Luke. Mark and John do not necessarily seem to refer to that in any way.

John, on the other hand, has a lot to say about witnesses, and about the necessity for multiple witnesses. Jesus Christ was talking about His Father, the Word of God, and He Himself as a witness. The people had not just one witness. It wasn't Jesus Christ's word against theirs. It was the Word of God, and above all else, the Father who had sent Him as a witness. So Jesus Christ's very life was exemplified by this need for witnesses.

Fourthly, what are the other Scriptures that this teaching is based upon? What else do we need to refer to, to understand what is being said?

We've looked at Matthew chapter 18. I have presented to you some of the misconceptions that I have encountered over the years in terms of the application of this verse. There's a lot more than meets the eye at just a casual reading.

Surprise, surprise! The same is true for all of God's Word!

Happy studying!

...Peter Nathan
19 Oct 02

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