

Principles and Proverbs –

CHAPTER 10 THE PRINCIPLES GOVERNING FELLOWSHIP

The question has been raised whether it is possible to find scriptural principles to give us clear and unmistakable guidance in the matter of fellowship. Of course, there are some obvious truths which are recognized by all men and women who are scripturally enlightened. There are errors of doctrine and offences of practice so serious that all enlightened men and women would agree that we cannot fellowship them. There are, on the other hand, errors so slight that no one would think of making them a cause of division. Between the two extremes there is more debatable ground and the difficulties arise in determining where the line should be drawn.

In time of strife there is a natural tendency for men to exaggerate and indulge in parody. It has been so in the brotherhood. If you are going to tolerate this, one party says, you may as well fellowship a man who does not believe the Gospel, or one who steals. If you are going to cut off for this, another party may reply, you may as well withdraw from a brother because he does not agree with you as to the king of the North, or because he has been known to visit a Natural History museum.

Such efforts of satirical exaggeration may relieve the feelings of disputants, but for every other purpose they are worse than useless in a serious discussion. They simply present the familiar spectacle of extremes begetting extremes, and they lead to a chaotic condition of the mind in which principles are ignored and men form arbitrary judgments according to their feelings for the moment and the subject which is most to the front.

Perhaps the first scriptural principle that we should note in this matter is that God sometimes leaves men to try them and prove all that is in their hearts. Even when the Apostles possessed the power of the Spirit in such large measure, they were not relieved of this difficulty of forming judgments. There was a difference of opinion between the Apostles Paul and Peter as to how far Jewish prejudices might be conciliated in the attitude taken toward Gentile believers. Evidently the Apostle Peter was in the wrong, withdrawing himself from some of the Gentile brethren, not on principle but for fear of what some of the Jews might say. Inspiration did not relieve these men from the onus of individual judgments and decisions or they would not have experienced the trials and temptations necessary for the formation of character. In writing their epistles, however, the Holy Spirit was their constant guide, and these writings bear witness regarding the truth of this dispute. The epistles of the two men are in agreement. There is no disputing there.

We may assume then that in these days also it is the will of God that we should experience some difficulty in applying scriptural principles to the circumstances of our own times. We must try to be honest and faithful in our application and on our guard against the fleshly feelings that so continually come to the front in time of strife. There is another principle that needs to be mentioned before considering what the Bible has to say regarding fellowship. All should pay earnest heed to the scripture now cited and reflect upon the truth stated regarding human weakness.

It is wrong to watch for iniquity, and yet in time of strife it is the most natural thing in the world to do. If a fleshly politician is angry with another over a dispute in parliament, how delighted he is if he can find some discreditable story about his rival. How ready he is to believe the ill report and to

put the worst possible construction upon it. It may have nothing whatever to do with the original quarrel, but that does not matter. Anything will serve as a weapon in the fight.

This is, of course, sheer diabolism, but unfortunately it is characteristic of human nature, and we are all tinged with it. It comes out the worst when a man is half conscious of having a weak case and is making desperate efforts to convince himself that he does well to be angry. If he believes in the Bible he needs then to remember that all who watch for iniquity and make a man an offender for a word shall be cut off (Isa. 29 : 20). It is usually an easy matter to collect reports derogatory to any man or any body of men. There is quite a temptation to use these make weights in time of controversy, especially if the original cause of dispute is slight. One on the defensive can be kept busy chasing the false reports and unfair interpretations, but never succeeding in catching one before the next is on the wing.

In a court of law a litigant is tied down to the actual charge. It is useless for him to fatten out his suit by all sorts of complaints remote from the original accusation. We are free from any such legal restrictions now, but it is well to remember that we have to go before a judgment seat far more searching than any ever set up by man, and for every idle word that we have spoken we shall have to give account. Do not let us watch for iniquity, then, either in those we accuse of specific errors or in those who accuse us. Such watching inevitably leads to countless idle and evil words.

Coming now to the matter of fellowship, we cannot make a better start than by taking all the passages of Scripture in which the word occurs. Truly it is not safe to assume that a word is used in the Bible in exactly the sense that men employ it now. The story is told of a theologian who, when challenged to show any scriptural warrant for the modern ceremony of confirmation, made a full list of all the passages in which the word confirmation occurs, and triumphantly exhibited it as conclusive proof. This was foolish as an argument, for he was assuming a meaning for the word quite remote from the original intention of the writers. Nevertheless, an earnest seeker after truth might have found that list of passages very helpful as showing the manner in which the early believers were confirmed in their faith.

We desire to use the word and to treat the doctrine of fellowship in accordance with scripture teaching. We may find benefit therefore in considering all the passages in which we have the word in our English rendering of the New Testament. In each case sufficient is quoted to bring the teaching to the memory of all persistent readers of the word. Any who fail to remember the connection can easily find the passages.

Acts 2 : 42. "Continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship and in breaking of bread and prayers."

1 Cor. 1 : 9. "God is faithful, by whom ye are called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ."

2 Cor. 8 : 4. "The fellowship of the ministering to the saints."

Gal 2 : 9. "They gave the right hand of fellowship."

Eph. 3 : 9. "The fellowship of the mystery."

Phil. 1 : 3-6. " I thank God upon every remembrance of you always in every prayer of mine for you all, making request with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now."

Phil. 2 : 1." Fellowship of the Spirit. (Connection of idea, comfort, love, and mercy in Christ)."

Phil. 3 : 10. "Fellowship of his sufferings."

1 John 1 : 3. "That ye may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ."

1 John 1 : 6. "If we say we have fellowship with him and walk in darkness, we lie; verse 7, But if we walk in light we have fellowship one with another and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."

In addition to these passages there are one or two other examples where a slightly different word is given the same English rendering.

2 Cor. 6 : 14. "What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness?"

Eph. 5:11. "Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them; for it is a shame even to speak of those things that are done of them in secret." (Fornication, uncleanness, covetousness. See context.)

Surely these passages give us explicit teaching of vital truths that are often forgotten.

The fellowship to which we are called is a fellowship of the Gospel. It is a fellowship with the Father and the Son, and it is a fellowship to which God has called us (1 Cor. 1: 9). This is, of course, quite in harmony with the statement of the Lord Jesus: No man can come unto me except the Father who hath sent me draw him.

Surely these passages should lead us to the conclusion that fellowship in the Gospel is a sacred matter not for a moment to be treated like the ordinary fellowships of the world. If men have been called to this fellowship by God Himself, we need clear scriptural ground before we cut them off from it.

We will next consider the commands regarding the matter of withdrawal. There are two of these commands that have often been quoted with very little regard to the context. Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, clearly may involve withdrawal, and it has been quoted in that connection. The context, as we have already seen, speaks of the works of darkness in question, evil wrought in secret of which it is a shame even to speak.

The other command referred to is the admonition to withdraw from those whose walk is disorderly (2 Thess. 3). The context shows that the immediate reference is to men who did no honest work, but were busybodies. The Apostle goes on to say in more general terms, If any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

There was the explicit command to withdraw from the one who so grievously offended in Corinth, and one of the objects stated and made clear in both the letters of the Apostle to that church was that the sinner himself might be brought to sincere repentance and salvation.

There is another direct command as to withdrawal in 1 Tim. 6. The immediate reference is to the perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds eager for worldly gain rather than godliness. There are several commands which clearly require a refusal to fellowship those who have not the doctrine of Christ or who depart from any element of the Truth. It should not be difficult to form a sound judgment as to where to draw the line in these matters. As Dr. Thomas remarked, the first principles of the Truth are few and simple. Moreover, they are so opposed to all fleshly wisdom that from the natural standpoint they do not seem attractive. If men are prepared to accept them at all, it should not be difficult to accept them as a whole.

In actual experience, the divisions on doctrinal points in these latter days have illustrated this fact. New theories have been brought forward and have come into collision with first principles. The unity of first principles has been revealed in the strongest light. Where the right spirit has prevailed the new idea has been repudiated as soon as its true character has been revealed. Sometimes, however, there is a wrong spirit; worse still, there is personal feeling. Then there is hardly a limit to the possibilities of evil that may surge round the dispute or of the monstrosities into which the confused thought may grow. An illustration of what is meant was furnished some years ago. A well-known brother put forward an idea in a Bible class, and although he was quite unconscious of the fact, he raised an issue affecting a principle of God's dealing with men. An older brother took the matter up in the right spirit, and after some discussion the younger student of the Word saw his way more clearly and repudiated the idea that he had expressed. Some years later, the one who had instructed him espoused the discarded theory, and with hidden causes at work to urge him forward, he elaborated it until division was inevitable for the sake of purity and peace. It is doubtful whether anyone living now holds the theory as it was put forward in time of strife. It played its part of mischief and destruction, and then it passed into the shadow of forgotten things.

For many years there has been unanimity among us as to the first principles of the Truth. New theories which menaced those first principles and caused division have not endured for the final judgment. They have perished of their own weakness, and if any of the pamphlets which caused such havoc are still extant, they are only retained as curiosities, not quoted by a single living soul as standard expositions of the Truth. There is a lesson for us in this.

Another series of scripture injunctions that we do well to call to mind in connection with the matter of fellowship is in condemnation of contention. We are required to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints, but we are not expected to contend among ourselves. Strife and debate are ranked among the evil works of the flesh (2 Cor. 12 : 20; James 3 : 14-16). In the letter to the Galatians there is a terrible warning as to the results of such strife (Gal. 5 : 15). We must be careful then to see that our contending is for the Faith and not merely a strife of words to no profit.

Yet another series of commands must be remembered. Judge not, that ye be not judged. With what measure ye mete it shall be measured to you again. "Judge nothing before the time until the Lord come who will bring to light the hidden things of darkness" (1 Cor. 4). "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? To his own master he standeth or falleth" (Rom. 14 : 4). Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law and judgeth the law. But if thou judge the law thou art not a doer of the law but a judge.

Some might despairingly raise the question, How can we reconcile these very serious warnings against judging each other with the plain commands to have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness and to withdraw from those who are disorderly?

The answer is that the very plainness of these commands helps us, for Scripture passes judgment on such matters. Truly we have to apply the judgment of Scripture, and there is danger of mistake in the application. It is the will of God that such responsibility should be ours and we must discharge the duty as faithfully as we can. We must try to remember the teaching of the

Word as a whole, and we must be honest in the application of specific rules. If one quotes the passage regarding unfruitful works of darkness, things done in secret of which it is a shame even to speak, and applies the passage to one well reported of for good works, the only real complaint against him being that he is too reluctant to be severe with offenders, surely it is evident that in such an application there is the most amazing perversity. If one in resentment of a difference in judgment as to the precise application of these commands denounces his brother as guilty of disorderly walk, repudiation of the faith and re-crucifixion of the Lord, it is difficult to believe in such a case that there is even an attempt to find righteous judgment.

The time has come to use great plainness of speech regarding this vital matter of fellowship in the Gospel. There has been much failure to realize the sanctity of the fellowship of the Father and the Son to which God has called us. There has also been a failure to understand the real meaning of brotherly love. It has been thought of as a weak, sleep-inducing sentimentality which may stand in the way of faithfulness to God.

An amazing but most illuminating comment was made by a brother who advocated withdrawal from some who were alleged to be no longer worthy of fellowship. There were doubts, he said, as to the faithfulness of these brethren, so let us give to the Lord the benefit of the doubt, and cut them off. It seemed that any tendency toward maintaining unity was regarded as sentimental weakness, the motion to withdraw was zeal for the Lord. It seemed that there was no recognition of the possibility that we might sin against God in wrongful cutting off of members called by Him to the fellowship of the Gospel. If there were doubts as to the standing of those accused, we should be giving the Lord the benefit of the doubt by cutting them off!

Surely everyone should know that we can give nothing to God but the tribute of our obedience, that we can only learn of Him through His Word, and that all the commandments are equally authoritative. And surely everyone must know that for every one passage of Scripture commanding withdrawal from workers of evil, there are scores of commands to love and to be forbearing and long-suffering; exhortations to be meek, temperate, kind, courteous, pitiful, to comfort the feeble, build up the weak, restore the faulty; to be rooted and grounded in love, to bear one another's burdens, to esteem others better than ourselves; to do all things without murmuring and disputing, and to be at peace among ourselves.

When we urge the law of love we do not mean sentimental human affection with all its partiality, its inconsistency and blindness. We mean love after the pattern set by the Lord Jesus who died for a church full of imperfection and who, under the very shadow of the cross, gave comfort to his faulty disciples. This law of love so incessantly urged upon us in the Word of God is the most soul-searching and the most difficult of all the commands. It involves a crucifixion of the flesh far more complete than that which comes to us from the bitterest criticisms of misguided opponents. If we ignore these commands while giving an extreme and unjustifiable application of the command to withdraw from the disorderly, we sin doubly. We sin in that which we do and that which we neglect.

From the testimonies cited, it is surely safe to draw the following principles;

1. "Fellowship in the Gospel is a fellowship with the Father and the Son, to which God calls us. It is therefore a sacred matter to be treated with reverent care."
2. "If we join ourselves to the world we join that which God has ordained to be separate" (2 Cor. 6).

3. "If we cut off brethren from fellowship without scriptural warrant we put asunder that which God has joined" (1 Cor. 12; Eph. 5 : 30).

4. "We must at all times remember the warnings against judging each other and the countless exhortations to love and forbearance."

5. "There are times when on the judgment of the inspired apostles we are called upon to withdraw from offenders. From those who turn from any element of the Faith" (2 John 10); "from those who by perverse disputings cause wrath, strife of words, railings, evil surmisings "(1 Tim. 4:6); from those who are guilty of moral offences "(1 Cor. 5 : 11);"such to be restored in love after repentance "(2 Cor. 2 : 7, 8).

6. "That all unrighteousness is sin, but there is a sin not unto death. Many such offences are to be reprov'd or rebuked and left to the judgment of the Lord" (1 Tim. 5 : 20; Titus 1 : 13; 1 Cor. 4 : 5).

7. "That in this sacred fellowship with the Father and the Son we can have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus will cleanse us from all sin."

Are these principles helpful? Are they fairly stated? If you think not, then take your Bible, put in a few hours study yourself and try to draw up a more faithful summary. Add such scripture as you think may be necessary, but do not ignore any of the testimonies referred to here.

In time of strife some may agitate that we cut off some of the Lord's servants who are judged beforehand to be unworthy. Some may be frightened by the suggestion that to decline shows them to be weak in the faith. Well, to the law and the testimony, that is the only guide. Have these brethren denied any element of the faith? Are they guilty of perverse disputings which are making your ecclesial life impossible? Have they been guilty of any of those moral lapses mentioned by the apostle? In short, is there any scriptural principle which justifies you in saying, These men were called by God to the fellowship of the Gospel, but they are now taking such a position that Scripture requires me to take the extreme step of cutting them off?

Perhaps there is no one charge that can so easily be tested, but rather a multitude of alleged offences which in the aggregate are regarded as providing a cause. Beware of these many and grievous charges. It is easy to bring charges against any body of men to show that their general standard of conduct is inferior to that of others. Whether true, half true, or wholly false, such accusations are difficult to judge. Fortunately we are not called upon to judge. Rather are we required to refrain. We have responsibilities in our own ecclesia to make it a real light-stand, but there is nothing in scripture to suggest that we are called upon to make a detailed examination of the way of life in other towns. Smyrna was not held responsible for the sins of Laodicea, and Smyrna would have been at fault if it had attempted to pass judgment. It was the Lord who judged.

Brethren need not be distressed by the thought that they are bound to pass judgment when others have fallen out. We need not take sides at all, indeed there are disputes in which those at a distance cannot possibly take sides. If some brethren in misplaced zeal insist on an unscriptural division, the whole responsibility lies with them. If they cut our brethren off they cut us off. Clearly we cannot seek their fellowship while they have cut off the body to which we belong. It is equally clear that they alone can repair the breach. We can say with perfect truth, We have not cut you off, you have cut us off. The old man of the flesh hates to make such a confession, but it

expresses a distinction which may make all the difference between life and death in the day of account.

If there is in these days a Laodicean church, the Lord will pass judgment on it. He is the only one qualified, and God has committed all judgment to him. We need to be very careful how we even form an opinion on such matters. A thousand times more careful how we speak and write.