

Good Relationships Among Brethren

by R. J. Evans

The Scripture provides much information concerning good relationships among those who are children of God. There are many positive teachings concerning how to get along—especially all the commands to love one another. There are a number of warnings against gossip, tale bearing, backbiting, slander, and sowing discord among brethren. The book of Proverbs is filled with wise instruction concerning relationships with others.

In the church, many problems have occurred because someone failed to abide by the teachings of God's Word. Brethren are told to put "away lying, each speaking truth with a neighbor, for we are members of one another" (Eph. 4:25); we are warned against causing "dissensions, contentions and heresies" (Gal. 5:20); those who are factious, causing "divisions and offenses" are to be marked (Rom. 16:17); a divisive person is to be rejected "after the first and second admonition" (Titus 3:10); also, there are warnings against being "idle, wandering from house to house, not only idle but also gossips and busybodies, saying things which they ought not" (1 Tim. 5:13).

But what about those occasions when we believe someone has sinned against us? Are we told what to do? Are we supposed to go around telling everyone, except the person himself, that he has sinned against us? Indeed, the Bible does give clear instructions on what to do in this situation—see Matthew 18:15-17. Notice the very first step: "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" (V. 15). How many do this? It seems to be so much easier to go to someone else first, and gain a sympathetic ear, rather than following what the Bible teaches. Quite often, those who operate like this, have not even been sinned against. It's often pettiness, hurt feelings, jealousy, an "ax to grind", etc., and not actually a sin, to begin with. Also, the other person may be totally unaware of any wrong they might have done. The passage goes on and gives further instructions: "But if he will not hear you, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' 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" (Vv. 16-17).

Years ago, when living in another state, we had a sister move from across the city and place membership with the congregation where I preached. We'll call her "sister Smith". Before she identified with us, the preacher where she had been attending told me that she had many admirable qualities, but to be careful, because she occasionally had a tendency to "stir things up." Well, after she had been with us for several months, I was in my study one day and the phone rang. It was sister Smith. After the usual greetings, she then proceeded to start telling me how she had been "wronged" by a particular couple in the congregation. I'll just refer to them as the "Jones". They were

fine Christians, very faithful and diligent in the Lord's work. They had been with us a number of years. As soon as I realized what she was attempting to do, I stopped her. I told her that I should not be a party to what she was beginning to tell me about this couple. This brother had his own business, so I gave her his office phone number and suggested she call him immediately and set up an appointment with him and his wife. Sister Smith immediately became somewhat "rattled" and started backing away from what she was about to tell me. From that point on, with my insisting that she contact this couple, the conversation ended rather quickly. At the next service of the church, I asked sister Smith if she had contacted the Jones couple about her complaints. Essentially, what she proceeded to tell me was that after giving it some more thought, she realized that it was all a big misunderstanding on her part and she had no problem with this couple. Never again did another incident like that one ever come up involving sister Smith.

That's interesting, isn't it? How many problems could be solved if Christians were willing to simply follow Bible instructions concerning establishing and maintaining good relationships among brethren. Some make a practice of dropping little "bomb shells" about someone, but immediately follow it up by saying— " But I don't know anything about it," "But I'm not getting involved," or "Oops, I shouldn't have said that." Such subtle actions, in reality, already have them involved. They are simply "stirring things up"! They have already done their damage. Those who conduct themselves in such a manner, destroy what credibility they may have had by their "behind the back" actions. Please note, concerning the seven things that God hates, what is listed in Proverbs 6:19: "A false witness who speaks lies, And one who sows discord among brethren."

When dealing with such deeds as just mentioned, the information that might have been revealed should be dealt with in a similar manner as having received an anonymous letter—dispose of it in the proverbial "File 13"!