

THE GOSPEL RIGHTS OF MINISTERS AND PEOPLE

Second Edition

A SERMON

Preached on Lord's Day Morning January 8th, 1865

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At the Surrey Tabernacle, Borough Road

Volume 7 Number 318

“See that you fall not out by the way.” Genesis 45:24

EVER since man fell out with God, men have been falling out with one another; and this was a natural consequence of the incoming of sin, and separation from the blessed God. And this we should not be at all astonished at, as if it were confined to the ungodly world; or if the quarrels and everlasting bickering's, lying's, and infamous slandering's were confined to the mere professing world; but many of these things exist even among the true brethren; so that Joseph thought there was not anything more likely to take place during their journey than disagreement: he easily recognized, many things by which a quarrel might arise, and therefore, he did, under the most emphatic circumstances, which we shall have this morning to notice, give them this kind exhortation, “See that you fall not out by the way.”

Hearers are very often offended with the minister about something or another, simply when he exercises his right as a minister; and sometimes a minister may, of course, also be offended with the people when they exercise their right. I, therefore, purpose pointing out to you, in the first place, *the rights of a minister*, and that the people have not a right, on the ground of his exercising those rights, to fall out with him. I shall, in the second place, point out as clearly as I can *what the rights of the people are*, and then show as we go along how essential it is, if we mean to live in peace, that we should give and take. Thirdly, I will give a fivefold view of *the emphatic circumstances under which Joseph gave the language of our text*, “See that you fall not out by the way.”

First, then, I will point out *the rights of a minister, as a minister considered*, after I have just described which I think it is very important I should do, what the spirit of a true minister should be, and the people, of course, as well. It is written, “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!” Now what in that psalm is called the unity of the brethren is in another place called the unity of the faith and is in another place called the unity of the Spirit. I will now give a definition of what appears to me to be the spirit of Christ, and which of course

should be the spirit of the minister, and at the same time the spirit of the people. Now what was the spirit of Christ? The spirit of Christ was this, it was the spirit of God's good will to men; this is one feature of the spirit of Christ. God had the best will to men, I was going to say, that he could have. God's good will to man arises from the greatness, eternity, and immutability of his love to man; and Christ came into this world in this spirit; so that his spirit was the spirit of God's goodwill to men. Christ entered in perfection into the goodwill of God, into the counsel of God. The second feature of the spirit of Christ was that of the completeness of his work. "This is my meat, to do the will" there, you observe, is the spirit of God's good will, "of him that sent me, and to finish his work." Therefore, his spirit was a spirit of mediatorial achievement and perfection; it was his very meat to do the work that God gave him to do. And if we possess the spirit of Christ, the unity of the faith, we shall also possess in our humble measure the spirit of God's goodwill, and of Christ's perfect work. I trust that this feature of the spirit of Christ has reigned in this congregation for a great many years, and I hope it will after I am gone, whether I go soon or stop longer; I pray that this spirit may prevail, for I am sure, when we get away from the spirit of the perfection of Christ, we then get into confusion; there is no clearness anywhere else. Thirdly, the spirit of Christ was a spirit of anticipated glory: "For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross." And if we possess the spirit of Christ, we shall possess this feature of it also. We shall look to the hills, whence comes our help; we shall look to the inheritance, the rest, the glory, the blessedness that awaits us. Another feature, and the last I will name here, of the spirit of Christ, was that of present, earnest devotion to God; he was devoted to God every night and every day, and I may say hour, in perfection. And if we possess the spirit of Christ, we shall also be devoted to God. We shall say, Here is a good will; how good is the Lord! and his mercy endures forever; and that will devote us to him; and we shall say, Here is an accomplished warfare, here is full and free pardon, here is double-bestowed grace now, and glory hereafter; and this also will devote us to God, and we shall say, Here is a glory awaiting us; only a little longer in this vale of tears; and presently the great High Priest will come and take down our earthly tabernacle, and then the soul shall enter into full possession and enjoyment of all for which it is fitted, and which it sought below. This, then, I will call the spirit of the gospel, and I think very few of you will call in question the propriety of this definition which I have given. There are, of course, ordinances and various other things, which I will not now touch upon.

I now come to *the rights of the minister*. The first right of the minister is to be himself; he must be himself. He must have full liberty to be conscientious. Now only for one moment rob the minister of his right and make him accountable to man for what he preaches, once do that, and I will show you where the minister would be. But before I do that, I may just observe that every one that is sent of God will preach just as he is led. It is written that "there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit; and that there are differences of administration, but the same Lord;" and that "there are differences of operation, but the same God." Now you observe here is uniformity in variety, as D'Aubigne expresses it, and variety in uniformity. One minister may be led to dwell very much upon the precept; he is so led; and there is a certain class of Christians that may, perhaps, prefer such a minister as that; he preaches the truth, but he dwells very much upon the precept; he is so led. Another minister is so gifted and so led, that he dwells almost perpetually upon the downward experience of the Christian; analyzes all the feelings, and sorrows, and griefs of the Christian; the man is so led and so preaches. There is another minister led, perhaps, as Dr. Hawker was, to preach the sweet promises of the gospel, and always seems to be on the mount of transfiguration. And another minister, perhaps, is kept very close to the mediation of Christ, and never seems to move

from it. So that we ought to allow each minister to preach just as he is led, providing the minister be himself, and not be guided by others. If I were asked what my position is in the gospel, and of course people find a great deal of fault with me; some say, "You do not preach this enough, and do not preach that enough, and do not preach the other enough: but I must not listen to any of that; I must go as I am led. Now my position is somewhere about this, that "the life that I live is by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me;" that appears about my position. If I come to Christian experience, I must have the mediation of Christ, to show its adaptation to that man's necessities; if I come to the law, I must have the mediation of Christ, to show he is the end of the law; if I come to the promise, I must have the mediation of Christ, to show how he has confirmed it; if I come to the precept, I must have the mediation of Christ, to show that the Christian must work by faith in Christ, for whatsoever is not of faith is sin. And if I come to eternal glory, I must have the mediation of Christ, as that which carries me there. And thus, then, the minister preaches as he is led. I know it is saying a great deal, but I solemnly believe that I have no more power sometimes, in most cases, indeed, to choose my own text, or even my own subject, than I had to choose my natural existence. Scriptures come to me, one scripture after another will come into my mind so imperatively and so powerfully, and sometimes so overwhelmingly, that if every one of you were to find fault with me for taking such a text, or such a line of things, I could not help it; I felt overpowered, carried along in that direction. That is the way I have gone on, and that is the way, I suppose, I shall go on; and I like every minister, whatever his gifts may be, to understand his own line of things, and speak after the manner for which he is capacitated. Now we will suppose a minister gives up his individuality, his honest conviction; one comes and says, "Really, you dwell so much upon the precept, that it is mere dry morality, and I can't hear you with pleasure." And the minister says, "Well now, I will not refer to the precept again, not more than once a year, because that friend does not like it." Another comes and says, "Really you are so harping and harping so everlastingly upon the mediation of Christ. I should like you to branch out, in this intelligent day, into some philosophical discussions; light up your subjects with something intellectual, splendid, grand, and attractive." "Well, then, to oblige that friend, I must not say much about the mediation of Christ." Another comes and says, "Really, you do dwell so much upon electing grace, that really, that dry doctrine, I am tired of hearing so much of it; I wish you would advance something else in this age of intelligence, of universal charity." "Well, then, I must not say any more about election, for that friend doesn't like it." Another comes and says, "Why, dear me, you are always talking about the feelings of the poor sinner, and the troubles of the poor sinner, and the evils of his heart, creeping along in that miserable way; I have heard so much of that experience, I am sick of it; I wish you would preach something else." "Well, then, I mustn't preach experience, mustn't do that." And then another comes and says, "I wish you would not say so much about that sworn covenant; I meet that word 'sworn covenant' fifty times, pretty well, in every one of your sermons." Must not preach that. So that the minister, thus listening to one and listening to the other, he will find at last that he must not say anything at all, except just what the few hearers left wished him to say. And so, each time he was preaching, one would say, "I wonder whose favorite point that is he is advancing now? I wonder whose favorite notion that is he is advancing now? I wonder whose wish he is complying with. I wonder whom he is obliging now?" Could you hear such a minister? The few that were obliged, perhaps, and had their notions represented in the pulpit, might hear him; I would not hear such a man myself. And therefore, whatever you do, do not attempt to check your minister in his honesty let him have his full range; let him have his full conviction; and let him preach out every truth of the everlasting gospel, not as in the sight of men, but as in the sight of God: for if he strive to please men, then is he not the

servant of God. Here I stand this morning; my name is James Wells, as thousands know, and I do not feel that I am accountable to one of you. I do not feel that I am accountable to any man or to any woman under the canopy of heaven for what I preach. I preach as in the sight of God, and I am accountable to God, and to God only. I received not my experience, I received not my pardon, I received not my salvation, I received not my liberty, I received not my humble gifts, if I have any gifts at all, or any business in the ministry at all, I received not my humble gifts from man, I received them from God; and to God, and God alone, I am indebted. The second right of the minister is of a circumstantial kind, that he is to rebuke with all authority, and he is to speak out, if he is so forced and led, what he really believes. I will tell you presently how the people have a right to deal with that. There are some people highly offended if a minister happens to deal out a reproof and should put himself into a position that some think he ought not to. My text says, "See that you fall not out by the way." Now a minister may perhaps err through overmuch zeal; and if he does, give him credit for his motive; do not check his honesty. Do not do as the foolish mother did when she was from home, or rather, when she came home, and the little girl saw there were several things wanted doing in the house, and the little thing set herself to work to make things nice and tidy by the time 'ma came home. But in her good intentions to do right she happened to break a favorite dish, let it fall, and the mother said, "Who did this?" Why, the poor little child at once confessed it, and the mother gave the child a good thrashing for breaking the dish. Could the mother ever expect the child to be honest after that? If I had been in the girl's place I would have said, "If ever I break a dish again, I will not confess it, I will deny it." A good mother would have said, "I am sorry you have broken the dish; but you have been honest to confess it, and you went to work from a good motive; and if I reproach you, and cut you up for this, why, I destroy honesty in its very bud." Now, then, we will come home to ministers. They may err sometimes through over-zeal; but then for them to err in their own estimation and err in the estimation of others may be a little different. Moses certainly committed an error when he slew the Egyptian; but his motive was good, and I have never felt I could slay Moses, though he slew the Egyptian. And Peter certainly committed an error, his zeal led him astray, when he cut the man's ear off; but I never felt that I could cut Peter's head off because he cut the man's ear off, though his zeal led him somewhat astray. Well, now, a minister stands; thus, he has upon his breastplate, as it were, the names of the people; he has at heart the welfare of the souls of the people; he has at heart, above all other things you can name, infinitely above his temporal advantages, his mortal life, and everything else you could name, the cause of God. And if persons come forward, and put themselves into a position, and say to that minister, "The cause with which you are connected shall not progress; the people shall not come together to express either their grievances or their desires; it shall not be so; things shall remain just as they are." I do not myself feel angry with Elisha; he told the unbelieving lord how matters would go with him, and who would be angry with him on the ground of his doing so? The unbelieving lord, when the prophet prophesied of what should take place, said, "Where's the money to come from to get food for all these starving people? I won't believe it. It's a lie." "Very well," says the prophet; "you shall see it with your eyes, but you shall not eat thereof;" and you know how the matter fell out. And if you have even a good man to deal with, take Jehoshaphat, he foolishly engaged his military powers to go to war for Ahab; and Jehoshaphat a good man, what did the prophet do? The prophet meets Jehoshaphat and reproves him. What did Jehoshaphat do? Why, immediately set to work, placed judges in the land, extended the cause of God, maintained the rights and freedom and liberty of the people of God; did not run away, nor misunderstand the reproof. Now, then, when a minister sees the cause of God thus opposed, he says to himself, I must be no respecter of persons; if an angel from heaven stand in

the way of God's cause, I must deal with them as the apostle said, let them be who or what they may. That minister deals out the reproof; that reproof is misconstrued; that reproof is misunderstood; and instead of the parties understanding what they ought to have understood, and uniting with the cause of God, they fly from it, Demas-like. And this is a great crime on the part of the minister, is it? Now, then, rob the minister of this right to speak as he is led, and as he feels; and you turn him into a dishonest man directly. Presently a similar circumstance re-occurs. "Ah, I know how the people disapproved last time; I will be crafty this time; I'll let the devil have his way; I'll let the cause be hindered; I'll let fleshly importance reign; and I'll take into consideration, not the cause of God, nor the truth of God, nor the power of God, nor the people of God, but my own carnal ease." What would you think of such a minister? Now, then, all I want is this: If I have ever erred in the respect I am now referring to, in your estimation, I want you to give me credit for honesty of purpose, for sincerity in the sight of the living God; and if you think the means were wrong, and if you think that my zeal caused me to use language I ought not to use, it is your perfect right to say so, and you are perfectly at liberty to differ; but at the same time do give me credit for honesty of purpose. And I will make one more remark, that, ever since I have been in the ministry, I have privately, I have publicly, God Almighty is my witness, done to my very utmost, with my means, with my prayers, with my preaching, with my testimony, and I have got others, as far as I could, to do the same, advocated the rights and liberties of the people of the blessed God. I have lived in my own soul in the boundless freedom of the gospel, and the blessed God has been gracious to me beyond expression. And if I am become the enemy of some people, or rather, if they are become my enemies, because I advocate the liberty of the gospel, and because I stand to no repairs when the cause of God is hindered or at stake; and however lordly and important fellow-worms may be, if they stand in the way of the chariot of God's salvation, that chariot is not to stop for them; and if they are become my enemies on this ground, I retire, whenever I do retire, with a clear conscience that my motive was good; and if you have a quarrel with me upon it, I have none with you, for quarrel I will not. "See that you fall not out by the way." So, the next minister you have, some of you, I speak not to you all, no, God forbid! but the next minister you have, some of you, deal differently with him; do not check his honesty; do not turn your back, and run away, and say, "I won't come back again, because he said so-and-so and so-and-so." Never expect perfection in your minister until you find it in yourself; and if his motive be right, though his manner be wrong, let the motive atone for the manner, and say, "He meant well: we didn't exactly see with him; the motive was good; the meaning was good: and we would rather see him too much alive than not enough alive; we would rather see him too determined upon our rights and privileges than careless about them; we would rather see him ready to lose the last drop of his blood rather than lose one inch of gospel freedom, we would rather see him so, than, see him that poor, namby-pamby, if you wish it, shill-shally, tune again, turn again, nothing at all." I say, let me have the man that is an iron pillar, a defended city, a brazen wall; that cares neither for the smile of the one, nor fears the frown of the other. Thus, I stand here this morning, God alone knows how many more times I shall stand here, I stand here this morning free from the blood of all men, both as to doctrine and as to circumstance in advocating the cause of God.

Now, then, in the next place, *your rights*. You have a right, I speak now to real Christians, to hear whom you please; that is your perfect right. Only, as Christians, you will, in the fear of God, take these two admonitions with you; one which says, "Take heed what you hear;" not *whom* you hear, nor *where* you hear, but take heed what you hear; see that it is God's truth: and second, the Savior says, "Take heed how you hear." So, then, take heed what you hear, that it be not man's gospel,

but God's gospel; and take heed how you hear; see that you hear in a way that mingles faith with the truth, nourishes your hope, endears the Savior and eternal things. You have a perfect right, therefore, to hear just where you please, and just whom you please. I have no dominion over your conscience, nor over your faith; I have no dominion whatever over you. I am not the servant of any man; I will not make you my servants: God forbid I should attempt any such thing. You have a right to sit in judgment upon what you hear. When you hear a minister preach, it is for you to test what he says; and if what he advances be not, in your mind, according to the word of God, do not allow any love you may have to the minister, any respect you may have for him, any past usefulness that there may have been in the ministry to you, to mislead your judgment. These are solemn matters to judge upon; and therefore, test what he says, criticize his sermons as much as you please, and if there be anything contrary to God's truth, then, for your own soul's sake, for the Lord's sake, and for the truth's sake, and for the sake of others, reject it; and the apostle says, "If an angel from heaven bring any other gospel, let him be accursed;" The third right is, that when he gives offence to certain parties, as I have done twice or thrice in my time, it is for you to ascertain whether your minister's motive was right, and ask yourself, "Now didn't he undergo some risk, and bear some loss, that even close personal friends couldn't prevent his standing out determined for the cause of God?" Well, if you are satisfied of his motive, of his sincerity, but differ as to the way in which he carried out that reproof, you have a right to that difference. But will you, on that ground, fall out with the minister and with his ministry, and say you will not enter the place again? thus throw your bread and butter away because it is cut rather too thick, or because it is not buttered on both sides? No; say, "We will cover over the means with the motive; we see the motive was good, and we disapprove of the manner; but we admire the motive and forgive whatever was wrong in the manner." Not run away from the cause of God; not run sneaking away and expressing sympathy with that that would keep the cause of God underground. Keep to Zion; keep fast to the truth; and do not allow a few faults in the minister, either in the pulpit or out, to drive you away from so much good. There are nine excellencies, and you throw the nine away because there is not the tenth. I will venture to say, if you had ten shillings in your hand, and happened to find out that one was a counterfeit, though you knew that the man that gave you the ten shillings most solemnly and sincerely believed that they were all good silver, and that he would not have given you a counterfeit for the world; it is an oversight; he has done it in ignorance; would you cast the nine shillings away because there was a counterfeit? and would you sue the man at law, and try to put him into prison for passing bad coin, when he was actually ignorant of anything of the kind, and would not have done it for the world if he had known it? So, my hearer, the minister has his limits; sometimes may err in some things; but if his motive be good, you should judge of him by that.

So, then, stand fast in your rights; you stand connected with the people of God as people of God. "Endeavoring to keep the unity" of family affairs? No. The unity of the flesh? No. "Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit." "See that you fall not out by the way." So that I think, if I understand my place, and you understand yours, we shall go on as we have done. I think few ministers have gone on with the main body of the people more happily than I have done, and more happily than I am doing. But I am grieved when I see some that I respect, and esteem put such constructions as I could not do so if I were a hearer; I should not fall out with my own privileges because the minister said something I did not like; I should not fall out with my bread and butter; I should not fall out with my mercies. If you love your minister, love him while he is alive, no use after he is dead; and if you wish him well, pray for him while he is alive, for he will not go to purgatory when he dies, so he will not give you the trouble to pray him out of that when he dies; no, certainly not. "See that

you fall not out by the way.” Why, I have boasted of you all over England, that you are a free people. They say to me sometimes, “What are your church rules?” “The Bible, sir.” “But have you not any rules?” “Yes, sir, the Bible.” Why, some years ago, if I had given way, some of you know it, you would have had as many resolutions passed at your church meetings, as a church and people you would have been bound with as many ropes as Samson was, until you lost your locks, lost your strength, and your eyes put out, and you would not be a free people as you now are, but would have been bound down with church resolutions, trash.

“Give me the Bible in my hand,
A heart to read and understand,
And faith to trust the Lord:”

and if that will not govern the Christian’s house, the Christian’s person, and the Christian church, I disdain all other laws. Where is the difference, Popery in retail, or Popery in wholesale, where is the difference? The Pope of Rome makes laws to govern men’s consciences; and if I pass resolutions at a church meeting to govern the consciences of the people, where is the difference? It is nothing but Popery in retail. Away with the whole of it, I will never own any rule or authority in spiritual things but this book, the Bible. Stand fast, therefore, in your freedom and in your liberty; I glory in preaching it, I glory in practicing it, glory with you in it, bless God for it. We will have no lords, we will have no dukes, we will have no esquires, we will have no great men; we will have Christ and the Christian, the truth and the grace of God, and nothing else. “See that you fall not out by the way.”

Now this sermon will do good to some of my poor brethren in the country; some of them that are oppressed by a long-faced deacon. So, would I! They want James Wells for them: I venture to say they would not get me under their thumb; no, not all the deacons in the world. I bless God for the deacons you have. I never, since I have been a minister, have been so happy with my deacons as I have been these last twelve months. Never has such progress been made before, never have such things been done before. May the Lord still bless them and keep them, and give them grace and wisdom, and then we shall still go on without falling out by the way.

Now just notice, in conclusion, *the good ground that Joseph had for this advice*. First, that they had been delivered from a deadly famine. Was not this tending to unity? Are not we delivered by a great deliverance? Should not, therefore, that salvation be our theme? And shall we fall out by the way, seeing salvation is our theme, a salvation to agree upon, a salvation to enjoy, a salvation to possess, and a salvation, too, that is forever? The next ground upon which Joseph might give this advice was, that he had rendered good for evil. They had hated him, purposed to destroy him, and did sell him, thought he was dead; but how freely he forgave, how kindly he received them! how was his soul and heart over-whelmed with a brother’s love towards them! Spiritually, is there not a greater than Joseph here? Has not our God rendered good for evil? has he not commended his love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us? Third, Joseph so managed them as to impress deeply upon their minds the exact fulfilment of his dreams, his divine dreams. And the Lord so deals with his people as to deeply impress upon their minds the exact fulfilment of his promises, the exact fulfilment of the gospel. And just mark the two dreams; just mark them, what they indicate spiritually. The one dream was that of the sheaves, to show the sustenance that should come; and our God has promised to sustain us. The other dream was that of the stars, the

moon, and the sun, expressive of the progressive exaltation of the people, that the wise shall shine first as the stars, they shall then be fair as the moon, they shall then be clear as the sun, and march triumphantly forth, terrible as an army with banners. And thus, the dreams were precisely fulfilled. So, the Lord rebukes, and reproves, and humbles, and tries us, to show the exact fulfilment of his blessed truth, and make us sing with the poet,

“His truth shall stand, his word prevail,
And not one jot or tittle fail.”

Fourth, he had found out the best part of the land for them. Now do not deny your trade; you are shepherds, do not deny it; the Egyptians do not like you, and they will wish you in some distant part, and that will be the best part; so, do not deny your trade. So, we must not deny our profession, we must not deny the truth; and our Joseph will so manage as to bring us into the very best land, the land of Goshen; there is no land so good as the gospel land. And the word Goshen means *near*. Why, say you, just now you said it was very far off. Very far off from the Egyptians, but it was near to Joseph; he took care they should be near to him, and he to them. And so, Jesus says to every one of his brethren, “Come near unto me; I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold, but God sent; you meant evil, he meant it to be good; now you shall dwell near unto me.”

The last point I notice is the prospects they had, Joseph, after the death of their father, he would not have brought their faults up again; he would not be reaping up old grievances; he was glad to stop them. God has forgotten my sins, and I will forget yours; God has forgotten my faults, and I will forget yours. And they went to Joseph and prayed that he would forgive them. Ah, you silly things; why, I forgave you seventeen years ago, when you first came. Well, but our father is dead. Well, what of that? Supposing you have lost a friend, that does not change my mind. And Joseph was grieved when they spoke unto him; said, “Don’t name it. I will now nourish you and your little ones; I am in the place of God, I am speaking by the inspiration of God; fear not, I will nourish you and your little ones.” So, he did, and so it was; left the promise of sure salvation; “God will visit you, bring you up out of this land.” So that Joseph was, I say, in a position to give great emphasis to the language of our text, “See that you fall not out by the way.” May the Lord, therefore, help us to give and take; to concede to each other our rights, and at the same time living in the glorious peace of the blessed gospel of God.