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A1043 – October 24, 2010 – Matthew 18:15-17
Church Discipline - Part 2

Last week we put church discipline in its context as a part of God's discipline, or training, of believers, and we made several points:

1. Discipline occurs because we are children of God. We are members of God's family.
2. Discipline is training – and is necessary for us to grow in spiritual maturity.
3. Discipline is necessary for the purity of the Church.
4. Discipline can be positive instruction through trials and endurance.
5. Discipline can also be corrective – correction and reproof when we are disobedient children.
6. The church is supposed to participate in Discipline.

This morning we are going to discuss the procedure for church discipline. Let's look at the classic passage in this area – Matthew 18:15-17.

¹⁵ “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. ¹⁶ “But if he does not listen *to you*, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. ¹⁷ “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

This sounds pretty easy, right? If a brother sins, you discuss it with him in private. If he refuses to acknowledge his sin, then you go back with 1 or 2 witnesses. If he still refuses to acknowledge his sin, you tell it to the church,

and if he refuses to listen to the church, he is treated as a “Gentile and a tax collector” – essentially, he is excommunicated. However, as easy as it is to understand, when you start thinking about how to apply it, it gets hard real fast. Frankly, after studying this, I am scared of it. I wish we weren’t responsible for it. But we are. This is hard to apply, but we must apply it – to do otherwise is disobedient. It is sin, and as we saw last week the church will be held accountable for it.

Let’s dig into it and see why it is so hard. Notice that at each phase of the process the intention is that the brother repents of his sin. Now, when I say “repent” I mean the acknowledgement of the sin as sin, not in rebellion, but in humble submission to God, e.g. confession. If he repents after the private confrontation, it’s over. If he repents after being confronted a second time with 1 or 2 witnesses, it’s over. If he repents after being confronted by the church, it’s over. So – this is the key, and you don’t want to forget it – **The purpose of church discipline is Restoration.** Always remember that we are disciplined because of our position – we are children of God – and that the purpose of discipline, in general, is our spiritual growth and maturity. In particular, when we sin, we have broken fellowship with our Father and we need to be restored to fellowship. This is the basis for discipline and we cannot understand it, apply it properly, or accept it, if we do not understand this. I cannot emphasize this too strongly, and if you don’t remember anything else, remember this - **The purpose of church discipline is Restoration.**

Let’s take this step by step. Look at the first step – Matthew 18:15 - ¹⁵ **“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.”** This is a conditional sentence – an “if, then” formula. If A happens, then B should happen. A is the condition, B is the response. What is the condition that starts the process – “if a brother sins”? So, the first condition is a brother must sin. What is the response? “Go and show him his fault in private.”

The key terms in verse 15 are “brother”, “sin”, “go and show” and “private”.

First, the term “brother” indicates that the sinner is a fellow believer. In context, Jesus is speaking to His disciples. The New Testament church has not yet started; however, the group of disciples would form the first church

and Jesus is giving instruction that is applicable when the church is formed. Consider this – as long as Jesus was on the earth, if one of the disciples sinned, would this process have been carried out? Probably some of it, the “go and show him his fault in private”, maybe. But with Jesus there, He would be in charge of this process. At that time, Jesus was present and leading his disciples. He, not the church, would have been the judge of His disciples. This instruction is looking forward to a time when Jesus is not physically present.

So, the term “brother” in this passage refers to a fellow believer. Which leads to another point – **Church discipline only occurs within God’s family – the family of believers.** This point is supported by other passages on discipline. Remember **1 Corinthians 5:9–13** from last week- ⁹ **I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people;** ¹⁰ **I *did* not at all *mean* with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world.** ¹¹ **But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one.** ¹² **For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within *the church*?** ¹³ **But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.** Paul had apparently instructed the Corinthians in an earlier letter not to associate with immoral people. In 1 Corinthians, he had to clarify this earlier statement – it didn’t mean don’t associate with non-believers – these are the people who don’t know any better and need the gospel - he meant don’t associate with believers who are immoral. Also, **2 Thessalonians 3:6 -** ⁶ **Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.** Note that it says “Keep away from every brother.”

Think back to last week. What was the first point we made about God’s discipline? **Discipline occurs because of a relationship – a Father/Son Relationship.** The point I am making about church discipline should be consistent with that – and it is. Church discipline is one of the tools God uses to correct His children. So – church discipline should only occur within the family of believers.

I need to make a brief comment about the distinction between the universal church and a physical gathering of people we call a church – like Fredericksburg Bible Church. Both believers and unbelievers will attend a church. However, only believers are members of the universal Church – the body of Christ – and only believers can be members of the fellowship of the local church. Just as the universal church consists only of believers, the assembly of the members of the universal church in a particular locality, such as Fredericksburg Bible Church, consists only of believers. Unbelievers are welcome here – we want unbelievers to come, hear the gospel, trust in Christ and become a part of God’s family. But until they become believers, unbelievers who attend this church are not members of the church. They are not a part of the family. Since they are not part of the family, the church will not address their behavior for the same reasons that it will address the behavior of believers. To put it bluntly, even though the church is not to judge outsiders, the church cannot tolerate behavior by unbelievers that can lead believers astray. That was the problem with the church in Thyatira described in Rev. 2:18-29, if in fact the woman called “Jezebel” and her followers are not believers (which they do not appear to be.) These are the men Paul warned the Ephesian elders about in Acts 20:28-30. If the behavior of an unbeliever who attends the church puts the church at spiritual risk, the unbeliever must be corrected – not for discipline and restoration – because there is no relationship with God to be restored – but for protection.

So, getting back to the passage - **Church discipline only occurs within God’s family – the family of believers.**

Next, the brother must have sinned. What kind of sin is Jesus talking about? What sins are subject to church discipline? **The short answer is any sin.** Jesus doesn’t limit His instruction to any particular kind of sin. He just says “sin”. Now, if you have a Bible other than a New American Standard Bible, the verse may read sins “against you”. There are variations in the manuscripts. Some of the New Testament manuscripts contain the words “against you” and others do not. The editors of the New American Standard Bible concluded that the words “against you” should not be included. If “against you” is included, it means any sin against another believer. If “against you” is not included, it means any sin. Should the process described in Matthew 18 apply to any sin? Or should it apply only between two brothers where one has sinned directly against the other? I believe Scripture,

taken as a whole, teaches that it should apply to any sin – **Luke 17:3**³ says **“Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.”** Also, Galatians 6:1 - **Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness;....**” Notice the words “any trespass”. Gal. 6:1 applies to “any trespass”. In this passage “any trespass” refers to any type of sin. Even if Christ is referring to sins against another brother, Gal. 6:1 indicates that church discipline can apply to all sin – whether it is a specific sin against another brother, or not. And I believe that Scripture is teaching us that the process Christ instructed us to follow in Matthew 18 applies to “any trespass” referred to in Galatians 6:1. [Now, Galatians 6:1 may have some nuances that have to do with the term “caught up” and the intentionality of the trespass, but I don’t think these nuances affect our point.]

So – Church discipline can begin with any sin. Once again, this is consistent with the points we made last week - **Discipline is necessary for us to grow in spiritual maturity, and Discipline is necessary for the purity of the Church.** What sin does not hinder our spiritual growth? What sin does not damage the purity of the Church? Bottom line – what sin does not offend God? All sin offends God. All sin is subject to God’s discipline. And all sin is subject to church discipline.

Now, there must have been a sin. There are some things that we think are sinful, but aren’t. They are things in which we have freedom in Christ. These are the areas in which Christ’s command in Matthew 7:1 – “do not judge, lest you be judged” - is intended to address – we are not to judge our brothers in these areas. The reason for this is that we have freedom in these areas – they are not sin. So, if God has given us freedom, who are we to judge others? If we do, we are making ourselves our own lawgivers and judges above God’s standards in Scripture. Romans 14 admonishes believers to respect each other’s convictions about matters that are permissible, but concerning which believers may have different convictions - such as food, drink, observance of days, etc.. We are not to judge each other in these matters. We don’t have the right to set our own standards and judge others by our standards. So- before we even start thinking someone has committed some kind of sin, we must be sure that it is a sin – and not something we think is a sin.

The next phrase we need to consider is this – “go and show him his fault”. In the Greek, “go and show him his fault” are imperatives, they are commands. It does not say “maybe you should go” or “consider going”. It says “go and show him his fault”. So – if a brother sins, we are commanded to go and show him his fault. We don’t have a choice. Gal. 6:1 is the same – “restore” is a command. Both Matt. 18:15 and Gal. 6:1 are commands. If a brother sins, we are commanded to go and show him his fault and restore him. These are instructions, and if we do not obey them, we are the ones being disobedient.

Finally, we are to go to our brother in private. The Greek says “between you and him alone”. This is pretty clear. The sinning brother is to be confronted privately. There is so much wisdom in this. For example – a private conversation helps clear up misunderstandings and prevents things from blowing way out of proportion. Maybe you got the facts wrong, maybe there are some additional facts that you aren’t aware of, maybe there was no sin at all. A gentle, private conversation will bring these things out and things will get resolved quickly and, hopefully, without damage to your relationship.

Another example – people are far more receptive to criticism and more apt to listen when they are not put on the spot in front of other people. In front of people, a person’s pride will take control and it will be very difficult to accept the truth about his behavior. He will most likely deny the charge to avoid embarrassment. And it will be more difficult for him to admit it later if he has to retract a denial he made in front of other people.

Once you have approached your brother with his sin, if he “listens” to you, you have won your brother. The Greek word for “listen”, in this context, means “listen, heed, obey”. Basically, you have shown him his sin, he is convicted and repents. He has been “won” back – back from disobedience into fellowship with God and the rest of the family. The whole point of the confrontation has been accomplished - Restoration.

Consider the other side of this – what does this say you are supposed to do if you are the one being confronted? If someone calls you up and says – did you do such and such? I know what my initial reaction would be – embarrassment, defensiveness, blame shifting, anger at the caller – “who are you to bring this up?” This is not how we should respond. Here is what you are supposed to do - you need to listen. Pay attention, be receptive. Put aside

your pride and listen. In fact, we should be thankful and accept the criticism for what it is – a loving correction in obedience to God. Consider it part of your training, helping you grow and mature spiritually. Your brother or sister in Christ cared enough about you and your spiritual growth that they gathered up the courage to say something to you about it. This is truly Christian love. If they are wrong, and you haven't sinned, you should explain and sincerely thank them for their concern. And if you have sinned, you should confess it and move on. And you should thank the person who brought it to your attention. **James 5:19–20** ¹⁹ says **My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back,** ²⁰ **let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.** That brother or sister has done you a big favor. It is hard to accept criticism – our pride gets in the way. But we must and we must accept it with love and thankfulness.

Like I said earlier, the process is pretty easy to understand. But it gets hard when you think about when and how to start the process. The difficulty to me is this – we know that discipline applies to all sin, but we also know that we are all spiritual children at different points in our spiritual lives. Some of us are baby believers, others have grown and are more spiritually mature. The difficulty arises from the tension between our call to holiness and grace. There really is no tension between the two – the problem is in our head – our attitude.

We perceive confrontation about sin to be legalistic – Pharisaic. But I think our perception is based on a wrong idea of why the confrontation occurs and how it should work itself out. Basically, we need to realize that the local church is a family; a community, a body, and each of us are being strategically gifted, placed and equipped by God for service to Him and the building up of the body of Christ. And all of us – not just Jeremy or the church leadership – are supposed to participate. Look at **Ephesians 4:11–16** ¹¹ **And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers,** ¹² **for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;** ¹³ **until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.** ¹⁴ **As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried**

about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming;¹⁵ but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even Christ*,¹⁶ from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love. We read the whole passage to give you a flavor of the context – this is talking about a lot of things, but for our purposes it is telling us something about our relationship with each other within the body of Christ. Notice that last part, “speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects unto Him who is the head, even Christ” and “from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.” The idea is this - we are in this together, we are each equipped for service, and one aspect of our service is to help each other “grow up”. And part of helping each other “grow up” is to admonish sin if we are aware of it. If one of us is weak, we need to strengthen him. If one falls, we need to restore him. Remember Hebrews 12:12–13 from last week:¹²

Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble,¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that *the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.* This is a job for all of us.

When we confront another believer about sin, we are doing the work of the service. When we are confronted about our sin, we need to realize that God is using our brother or sister to help us learn and grow. By this process, we are strengthening weak hands and feeble knees. We are making straight paths for lame limbs to be healed rather than put out of joint. We are helping each other grow up so that we may “**attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.**” As Ephesians 4:13 said. And this is all to occur “in love” on both sides – keeping in mind 1

Corinthians 13:4-7 - ⁴ Love is patient, love is kind *and* is not jealous; love does not brag *and* is not arrogant, ⁵ does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong *suffered*, ⁶ does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; ⁷ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things,

endures all things. This should be our attitude when we confront and when we are confronted.

Now, all that being said, when do you say something to your brother? The answer is anytime you become aware that a brother or sister in Christ has sinned and has not repented. Obviously, the sin needs to be known. This does not mean the church should investigate its members for the purpose of uncovering sin. There is no authority given in Scripture to do this. So, if your heart has become hardened in a particular area and you have a pet sin you don't think you really need to confess, just try to make sure no one else knows about it. If you are successful - No church discipline for you! However, as we learned in our Hebrews passage, you won't get away with it – God will discipline you – He will get your attention.

As Fred Bates used to say, we need to acknowledge our sins quickly and keep short accounts with God. What he meant was, as soon as we sin, we need to confess it according to 1 John 1:9 and move on. If we sin and we confess our sin to God – meaning we humbly acknowledge our sin before God, not in rebellion, but in submission to Him - there is no need for discipline. Restoration has begun. Now, this does not mean that we will not suffer the consequences of our sin – we probably will. But we can have the assurance of knowing that we are back in fellowship with God, with all the benefits that confers, and that the consequences we are suffering are just that – consequences – and not an expression of God's displeasure with us. In fact, this assurance that we have in fact been restored to fellowship with God helps us handle the consequences.

Why is it important that we be confronted as soon as our sin becomes known? Again, think about the main reason for God's discipline – to help us grow up spiritually. This is an opportunity for growth. It is entirely possible that I didn't know that I sinned. I might not know enough Scripture to know that what I did was wrong. And if I did know better, I need to be corrected quickly before things get more serious. If I am confronted about my sin – a sin I clearly committed – and I refuse to repent of it, something is seriously wrong with my walk. This must be dealt with sooner, rather than later, or else my rebellion will disable me spiritually and will probably infect the other believers in the church.

This leads to another question. How do we confront one another? First, before we do anything else, we must pray. We must pray for wisdom, as we are instructed in James 1:5. We must pray for the other person, that he will recognize and confess his sin, as we are instructed in 1 John 5:16. And we must pray for ourselves, that we will not sin in the process. The situation is very dangerous and must be covered in prayer.

Next, we must be prepared to properly handle Scripture. And Scripture must be used to convict the person. We all know what 2 Timothy 3:16 says - ¹⁶ **All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;** ¹⁷ **so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.** When we confront another believer, they need to realize that you are just the messenger; that the argument is not with you, but with God. In fact, every time we open the Bible, whether at church or at home, there is a conviction/confrontation going on and helping us grow. The difference between Bible study and the Matthew 18 private confrontation is that God is sending another person directly to you to call your attention to the problem. Kind of like – “well, Mark didn’t get it when he read it, and he didn’t get it when Jeremy taught it, maybe he will get it if Doug comes and tells him about it.” We all can be very blind to our sin at times – remember how God used Nathan to show David his adultery and murder. David was pretty blind – but we all can be pretty blind.

Next - we have already talked about this – the initial confrontation is private. It is between you and your brother. We need to consider how Gal. 6:1 fits into this. Matthew 18:15 says that the confrontation is a one on one private confrontation. It does not specify who is doing the confronting. Galatians 6:1 instructs “you who are spiritual” to handle the restoration. As Jeremy taught when he covered Galatians 6:1, this means persons who are “spiritually mature” should be involved. What if the one who becomes aware of the sin is not spiritually mature? In my opinion, this is what should happen: The initial confrontation should be made by the person who becomes aware of it. If he is not spiritually mature – a new believer, for example – there may only be one confrontation. Basically, the new believer would call the brother’s attention to the sin and see how he responds. If there is no repentance, it is probably best for that new believer to get out of the situation and go immediately to the

next step. Otherwise, as a new believer, they may be more easily caught up in the temptation to sin referred to in Galatians 6:1.

Now if a spiritually mature believer becomes aware of the sin, they may be able to handle the initial confrontation a different way and may be able to have several meetings or conversations with the brother before going on to the next step. This is where his spiritual maturity helps – he may know better about what the situation is, what he can handle, and when the process needs to move on to the next step.

One final point about the private confrontation – it needs to be handled with love, with gentleness and with respect. Love we covered earlier. Here is a great quote about gentleness by Carl Laney, the author of “A Guide to Church Discipline”. Gentleness is “a condition of the heart and mind which evokes courteous, considerate, thoughtful and humble dealings with others. It is the opposite of pride, self-assertiveness and self interest. The gentle Christian is neither shocked nor dismayed at the failure of others, for he is not occupied with making comparisons.... The gentle person God uses to help restore a sinning saint will be firm and uncompromising, and will never deny the awfulness of sin. But the person God uses will also show Christlike consideration for the fallen believer.” Notice the attitude – courteous, considerate, thoughtful and humble. Respect is covered in **1 Timothy 5:1–2 - ¹ Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but *rather* appeal to *him* as a father, *to* the younger men as brothers, ² the older women as mothers, *and* the younger women as sisters, in all purity.** The bottom line is the Golden Rule – put yourself in their shoes, consider their situation, approach them in love, and treat them as you would want them to treat you.

Now, if we handle this first step – private confrontation- correctly, I expect that in the vast majority of cases, if there is a sin, the brother will repent and the matter will be finished. The sin may be of such that, although there is immediate restoration to fellowship, the consequences may require ongoing encouragement and care in order to restore the damage and re-equip the person for service. This may be some kind of addiction, such as drugs or alcoholism, or other sin with ongoing consequences. This restoration is the job of the spiritually mature referred to in Galatians 6:1.

However, in some cases, the brother will not repent. In that case, we must move to the next step. Look at **Matthew 18:16** ¹⁶ **“But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED.** If the private confrontation does not work, the person who first approached him is to go back to the brother with one or two witnesses. This is a little more formal and turns up the pressure on the sinning brother.

Why the witnesses? There have been several reasons given. Christ is quoting **Deuteronomy 19:15** - ¹⁵ **“A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed.** Deut 19:15-21 is the law concerning testimony and the penalty for false testimony. In Matthew 18, the witnesses are there to confirm something. What are they there to confirm? There is no indication that they must be witnesses to the original sin, if they are – great. But they don’t have to be. They are apparently there for three reasons – (1) to hear both sides of the story and see if a sin has been committed, (2) to convince the brother of his sin and urge him to repent, and (3) to confirm whether or not he repented.

Notice that the number of witnesses is very small – only 1 or 2. This indicates that the matter is still intended to be kept confidential and only those who need to know what is going on are involved in the discussion. It is still a relatively private discussion – it should not be talked about outside the group. But the pressure on the brother is certainly being turned up because others are being brought in.

Based on Galatians 6:1, I think the witnesses should be spiritually mature. Things are becoming very serious at this point in the process. The brother has been confronted with his sin and has refused to repent. The witnesses are needed to convict the brother of his sin and the need for repentance. Only the spiritually mature should handle this job. This is not something a new believer should handle.

I believe that this is the point that the elders need to be consulted, and it may be that some of them should act as the witnesses. It is interesting that Matthew 18 doesn’t specifically refer to church leadership, and neither do the other church discipline passages (except in 1 Timothy 5:19-20 which deals

with the discipline of an elder). However, since the elders are the overseers of the church and responsible for its spiritual health, they should be involved in the process. In **Acts 20:28**, Paul tells the Ephesian elders ²⁸ **“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.** In my opinion, the elders should begin to get involved at the point of Matthew 18:16. As I have already said, if the Matthew 18:15 private confrontation has been unsuccessful, it means there may be a serious spiritual problem with a brother that may affect the whole church. This is something the elders need to be consulted about sooner rather than later. So, I suggest that, if the private confrontation of Matthew 18:15 does not work, the elders be consulted before moving on to the Matthew 18:16 stage.

One other thing to note – I do not believe that this passage limits this to one meeting. Depending on the situation, there may be a process of conviction. There may be progress made in the first meeting, and several meetings may be required to work things out. However, at some point, it will become evident that the brother will either confess or refuse to confess his sin.

If private meetings are held with the witnesses, and the brother repents, the process stops and we move on to helping the brother deal with the consequences and re-equipping him for service.

If, after all this, the brother is made aware of his sin and he refuses to repent, we go to the next step and the matter goes to the church. Look at the first part of Matthew 18:17 - ¹⁷ **“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church...”** The matter is to be brought to the attention of the church and the church attempts to convict him and bring him to repentance. How is the matter to be told to the church? First, the word for church is “ekklesia” which means congregation or assembly. Jesus is saying that the congregation is to be informed – not just the elders. This is a reason why the elders need to be consulted before it gets to this point, and why, I think, the elders should be involved in the private meeting stage of Matthew 18:16 – because, if things are not resolved at the private meeting stage, the matter is brought to the attention of the congregation. But, before the matter is brought to the attention of the congregation, the elders must be consulted, if they have not

been consulted already. A person should not stand up in the middle of church and make a public announcement.

How should the announcement be handled? Jesus does not give us any instructions about how and what to tell the congregation. He just commands us to tell them. So – we have freedom to use our judgment about this. Many factors will come into play – what the sin was, the other persons involved, the circumstances and other factors. How the congregation will be told will be determined by the specific facts and circumstances of each case. As far as who tells the congregation, this is a responsibility of the elders in their capacity as overseers of the church.

Even at this point, the congregation should respond with an attitude of love, humility and concern for their brother. Such a response may be the thing that finally moves the brother to repentance.

However, if he doesn't repent, Christ instructs us to move to the next level – excommunication. Look at the last part of Matthew 18:17 - **and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.** When Christ says “let him be to you as a Gentile and tax collector”, He means that the brother is to be ostracized from the fellowship. Basically – put out on his own. In Jewish culture of the time, both Gentiles and tax collectors were outsiders. Gentiles were outside by birth. Tax collectors were regarded as traitors because they served Rome against their own countrymen, and often overcharged people and kept the surplus. Jews did not associate with Gentiles and tax gatherers. Jesus' point was not that Gentiles and tax gatherers should be treated as outcasts, but He was using the analogy to get his point across – treat the brother as an outcast like the Jews customarily treat Gentiles and tax gatherers.

Does this mean absolutely no association with the brother? Basically yes – other than what is absolutely necessary. Remember, the point of excommunication is to move the brother to repentance. This final step is supposed to take away the support of the church family, his close fellowship with his believing brothers and sisters. It is like when a child goes so far that the only thing that can possibly get their attention and turn them around is to make them leave the home. That is what is happening here. Most communication is cut off – other than urging them to repent and return. It is

a very hard thing to do. It is a very sad situation. But this is what it may take to bring them back. This is tough love and we are commanded to use it, if it becomes necessary.

At this point, I need to make something very clear. The procedure I have gone over today is the general procedure that should be applied in most cases. However, there are certain situations where this procedure will need to be modified – these are situations where the sinning brother or sister is a husband or wife, or a child still under his parent’s authority. Both of these situations involve divine institutions – marriage and family – that have divinely defined relationships and authority structures – for example, the husband as head of the family. Any church discipline situation is going to be complicated and highly sensitive. When the situation involves a husband or a wife or a child, the complexity will increase exponentially. I have not had time to study and consider precisely how the general procedure should be modified to deal with these special situations – so I will not offer any opinions. However, I believe that this third step will be modified – husbands and wives should not disassociate themselves from one another, even if one of them has been excommunicated from the church. Husbands are still required to love and care for their wives and wives are still required to submit to their husbands. If the problem involves children still under their parent’s authority, I think the matter should be discussed with the parents and they should be responsible for disciplining their child.

More than likely, the sinning brother is going to leave the church before we get to excommunication. What do we do then? I haven’t found anything that permits us to call up the other churches in the area and give them a “heads up” that we had a member under discipline who left the church and may be showing up at their place. In New Testament times, there was one church in the community – so moving from church to church within the community wasn’t an option. Now, given the number of churches in our area, and our ease of mobility, it would be very easy for a member under discipline to just move on to another church. I think a church should realize that and should ask a person who wants to join the church where they had been attending and if they left under some sort of discipline. We should probably require letters of recommendation and get their permission to contact the leadership of their old church and confirm that they left in good standing. If all churches did this, it would make it more difficult to move from church to church and

avoid the continuing discipline. Remember, the point of discipline is to bring a person to repentance – to restore them to fellowship and help them grow up spiritually. If they are able to easily move around, they are hurting themselves – they remain in rebellion and God will continue to put the pressure on them in some other way. Things will not get better for them. He will get their attention.

If a brother is excommunicated, should he be brought back into the church? Look at **2 Corinthians 2:6–8** - **⁶ Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which *was inflicted* by the majority, ⁷ so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort *him*, otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm *your* love for him.** Apparently, the Corinthians put one of their members under discipline. There is a debate about whether or not this is the brother who committed incest referred to in I Corinthians 5. Whether it is or not, the person had been under discipline by the church, but had apparently repented. Paul instructed the Corinthians to forgive and comfort him and reaffirm their love for him so that he would not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Note that the “excessive sorrow” caused by the disciplinary action appears to be the catalyst that brought him to repentance. Once he repented, he is brought back into fellowship, loved and comforted, and the church starts working on restoring and re-equipping him for service. This is a case of church discipline working. And, in most cases, this is exactly what we should do. [However, the sin may be of a kind that it is not prudent or legal for the brother to physically return to the church – this is a sad situation, but the necessary consequence of his sin is that he cannot physically return to the church. However, if the brother has repented, the church should still do what it can to express its love and forgiveness, comfort him, and re-equip him for service.]

The critical point to remember about the whole process is this – the Matthew 18 process starts because someone committed some sin – some sort of immorality for example. But – pay attention to this – this is the key - **it continues only because of another sin – willful unrepentance – in other words, rebellion against God.** The person has been made aware of his sin (if he didn’t know it to begin with) and, after many opportunities to repent, willfully and defiantly chooses not to repent. This is out and out rebellion against the living God, and the church cannot tolerate it. So, church

discipline is not so much pointed at the original sin, but at the sin of rebellion - the fact that, with full knowledge of their sin, a believer willfully refuses to repent. This is the only reason church discipline progresses to the point of excommunication. And repentance is the only thing that can stop the discipline and begin the restoration process. It is the only thing that can bring a person back into fellowship after excommunication. The key is repentance.

So, this week we learned:

- 1. The purpose of church discipline is restoration.**
- 2. Church discipline only occurs within God's family – the family of believers.**
- 3. Church discipline can begin with any sin.**
- 4. Church discipline must be covered with prayer, handled with Scripture, and carried out with love.**
- 5. Church discipline stops with repentance.**
- 6. Church discipline only continues for one reason – willful unrepentance – or rebellion.**

We are out of time, and there is much more we can get into about this topic. I was hoping to have time to compare what we learned to the two court cases I presented last week, but we are not going to be able to do that. So – you can have some homework if you like – go back and read the cases and think about what we have learned and see what you think.

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