

Church Discipline: Matthew 18:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 5
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We have something very weighty to deal with this morning as a church. The members meeting following the service has to do with a church discipline situation that needs to be told to the church. Therefore I'm going to be preaching this morning on the topic of church discipline. That term may be totally foreign to some of you. It may sound scary. It may sound harsh or mean. It may sound unloving or legalistic. Why would a church discipline anyone, you might say. Aren't churches supposed to be loving and kind and welcoming and forgiving and gracious? What place does discipline have in the church? And what kind of discipline are you talking about anyway?

I hope to answer these questions from God's Word this morning, and my prayer is that as we look to God's Word and understand what this is all about, that we will see God's goodness to us in commanding us to exercise church discipline. Here are the three questions that will serve as headings for us this morning. First, what is church discipline? Second, what are the purposes of church discipline? And thirdly, how do we carry out church discipline?

What is Church Discipline?

At the outset, it's necessary for me to acknowledge that church discipline is a practice that has been largely lost in today's churches. Many of you have probably been going to church all your life, and this may be the first time you've ever heard this talked about. And therefore you may have an impulse within you that says, "That's not right. We never did that in the church I grew up in. That just doesn't sit right with me." And that's where we have to check ourselves and ask the question, "Is God's Word my authority, or is tradition my authority?" At this church God's Word is our authority, and it's our desire to read it, study it, understand it, and do what it says. James 1:22 tells us, "be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." Our intention today is to hear these passages that I just read, and then to do what it says. These commands are in the Bible, and we're not at liberty to disobey them or ignore them.

So what is this all about? It's about confronting sin. Look again at Matthew 18:15, "If a brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault . . ." From the very first step, this whole process is church discipline. And from start to finish, it's about confronting sin and calling individuals to repentance. Thus, we could define church discipline in one word, and that is "accountability." Church

discipline is the church holding one another accountable to fight the fight of faith, to repent of sin and pursue holiness, to humble ourselves and admit our sins, and to look to Christ for forgiveness. Church discipline is not mainly about removing people from membership. Sadly, that needs to happen sometimes. But that's not how we should think of church discipline, mainly. The essence of it is accountability. We love one another enough that we are willing to do the hard thing of confronting one another's sin. When a brother or sister sins against you, you go and tell them.

Now we shouldn't let that little phrase, "against you," limit the scope of this too much for us. You might say, I know of so-and-so who is a member of the church and is living in sin, but they haven't sinned *against me*, it doesn't affect me. Therefore, I don't need to confront them. Listen, if it's an individual who is claiming the Name of Christ and is living in sin, then it is most definitely a sin against you, and against the whole body of Christ, because they are slandering the Name of Christ. And it's our responsibility to confront that sin. If you know about it, you're responsible to do something about it.

What's our natural inclination when we hear about a person's sin? Our natural, sinful impulse is to gossip. We want to call up a friend and share the news. "You know, we really need to pray for so-and-so because he's struggling with pornography, he's cheating on his wife, so-and-so's marriage is falling apart, she's dressing immodestly, they stopped coming to church, they're being divisive, they're embracing false doctrine." Our sinful nature, when we become aware of a person's sin, wants to tell others. And if someone were to say to us, "Well, have you talked to that person about their sin?" We might say, "Oh, well, I wouldn't want to do that. I don't think that's my place. Maybe the elders should do that, or someone who knows the person better than I do. I just thought I'd tell you so you can pray for them."

Can you see in this verse that that's exactly the opposite of what Jesus commands us to do? Our tendency is not to confront the person in sin, but to tell others. Jesus says confront the person in sin, and don't tell others—"go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone." The hope is that the person will listen. The hope is that they will heed the rebuke and repent of the sin and turn away from it.

But what happens if there is not repentance? What happens if the person says, "No, I'm going to keep living in this sin"? Or what if the person sounds agreeable, and says they will change, but then they don't? What are you supposed to do? Do you just throw up your hands and say that you tried your best? No! The text goes on. The hope is that the person will listen, that is, heed the rebuke. Verse 16, "But if he does not listen, take one or two others along

with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” You take others with you this time, and they are to witness what’s going on in this situation. They are to join you in calling this person to repentance, and they can then confirm your assessment of the situation. Is it really the case that this person is unrepentant? Or was there some kind of misunderstanding? The hope again is that the person will listen, heed the rebuke, and that the situation can be resolved.

But what if the issue still is not resolved? What if the others see that there is, indeed, unrepentant sin, and the individual in sin is still unwilling to change? What then? Verse 17, “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.” You see, as the situation goes on, more and more people are brought in to play a role in holding the individual accountable. If they won’t submit to the accountability of the first person, then one or two others enter into the discussion. And if they won’t submit to that group, then it must be brought to the church. The church needs to be told what’s going on so that everyone can confront the sin. More and more pressure is applied if the person persists in this sin.

Finally, if even that step does not bring about repentance and change, then the person must be removed from the membership of the church. The second half of verse 17, “And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” That’s a pretty severe statement. It means the person is to be treated as an unbeliever. But lest we view this too harshly, we should also be reminded of how we should treat unbelievers. We are to be kind to them. We certainly welcome them in our worship services, although we ask them not to participate in the Lord’s Supper, which is only for believers. We care about the needs of unbelievers and seek to help them. We share the Gospel with unbelievers and hope that they will repent and believe. This is exactly how we would treat someone who is removed from the membership of the church. We would share the Gospel with them and continue to confront their sin. We would encourage them to attend church. However, we would instruct them not to partake of the Lord’s Supper. We would reach out to them and help them and love them as we would anyone in need. And we would be eager to receive the person back into membership upon the evidence of true repentance.

What are the purposes of Church Discipline?

Let me read from our church constitution. I am very grateful for these clear and insightful statements about church discipline.

Section 5 - On Church Discipline

Any member consistently neglectful of his or her duties or guilty of conduct by which the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be dishonored, and so opposing the welfare of the church, shall be subject to the admonition of the elders and the discipline of the church, according to the instructions of our Lord in Matthew 18:15-17 and the example of scripture. Church discipline, then, should only be contemplated after individual private admonition has failed.

The purpose of such discipline should be for the repentance, reconciliation, and spiritual growth of the individual disciplined (see Proverbs 15:5; 29:15; I Corinthians 4:14; Ephesians 6:4; I Timothy 3:4-5; Hebrews 12:1-11; Psalm 119:115; 141:5; Proverbs 17:10; 25:12; 27:5; Ecclesiastes 7:5; Matthew 7:26-27; 18:15-17; Luke 17:3; Acts 2:40; I Corinthians 5:5; Galatians 6:1-5; II Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15; I Timothy 1:20; Titus 1:13-14; James 1:22);

For the instruction in righteousness and good of other Christians, as an example to them (see Proverbs 13:20; Romans 15:14; I Corinthians 5:11; 15:33; Colossians 3:16; I Thessalonians 5:14 [note this is written to the whole church, not just to leaders]; I Timothy 5:20; Titus 1:11; Hebrews 10:24-25);

For the purity of the church as a whole (see I Corinthians 5:6-7; II Corinthians 13:10; Ephesians 5:27; II John 1:10; Jude 24; Revelation 21:2);

For the good of our corporate witness to non-Christians (see Proverbs 28:7; Matthew 5:13-16; John 13:35; Acts 5:10-14; Ephesians 5:11; I Timothy 3:7; II Peter 2:2; I John 3:10); and

Supremely for the glory of God by reflecting His holy character (see Deuteronomy 5:11; I Kings 11:2; II Chronicles 19:2; Ezra 6:21; Nehemiah 9:2; Isaiah 52:11; Ezekiel 36:20; Matthew 5:16; John 15:8; 18:17, 25; Romans 2:24; 15:5-6; II Corinthians 6:14-7:1; Ephesians 1:4; 5:27; I Peter 2:12).

Let's look at those more closely. We first see that repentance, reconciliation and spiritual growth is a purpose of church discipline. That was clear in Matthew 18. The hope is that the person in sin will heed the rebuke, and thus we gain our brother. That's what we want. We don't want to put people out of the church. That's not the goal. That's not the desire. We want people to repent and to be reconciled and to grow spiritually.

We see this also in 1 Corinthians 5, where Paul discusses a case of church discipline. And here it is a case of sexual immorality. This man has his father's wife, the text says, and we can assume that this man is not turning away from this heinous sin. And yet the church isn't doing anything about it. That's why Paul chastises them. The local body of believers is not holding this man accountable as they should. Now, notice that the issue is not some sin for which the person is repenting and seeking Christ's forgiveness and striving to overcome. Paul is not instructing that the church should remove individuals from the church anytime anyone sins. If that was the case, none of us could be members. The problem is when a person is living in unrepentant sin. That's when the church needs to step up and confront that sin in a corporate and severe way.

The way that Paul describes this action in verses 4-5 is shocking and frightening. What does it mean to deliver someone to Satan for the destruction of the flesh? Well, I think it's the same thing that Jesus is talking about in Matthew 18 when He says if a person "refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." What's being described in each passage is the removal of a person from church membership, which is, in effect, being delivered over to Satan. There is a certain level of protection that we all experience because we are part of the church. By our commitment to a local body of believers we are protected from the evil one. But that protection is removed when a person is excluded from the fellowship because of unrepentant sin.

But especially notice the purpose clause in Paul's statement in verse 5, "so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord." The purpose of church discipline is not punishment. The purpose is restoration. Some people think church discipline sounds harsh and unloving, but we don't do our brothers and sisters any favors when we ignore serious sins in their lives. That is what would be harsh and unloving. But when we follow the steps that Jesus set out for us in Matthew 18 we are showing that we love a person so much that we're willing to do the uncomfortable thing and confront their sin. And if need be, we'll even exclude them from the fellowship of the church in order to show them the gravity of their unrepentant heart. And even that, especially that, is with the hope that the person will repent.

2 Corinthians 2 describes another situation in which the opposite response is needed. Instead of discipline, Paul tells the church to forgive and comfort this individual so that he won't be "overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." He writes in 2 Corinthians 2:6, "For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough." Apparently, the church had disciplined this individual, but now the

individual had repented and it was time for forgiveness and comfort. That's what we hope for. That's the intention and the goal, that the person will be shaken enough by the seriousness with which the church is dealing with his sin, that he will come to his senses and repent. And what a celebration that would be—for the individual who had resisted so long to finally humble himself and admit, "I was wrong. I was blind to my own sin. I couldn't even see that you were trying to help me. But now I see. I repent. I submit. I want to change, and I want the church's help to do so." What a glorious day that would be!

Unfortunately, however, we have no guarantee of that outcome. We are to pursue these steps in obedience to God's Word, and our hope is that it will have a happy ending for the individual in sin. But even if the person never repents, we are still responsible to exercise church discipline, because there are other purposes as well.

It's necessary for sin to be confronted in this way for the purpose of instructing in righteousness and providing an example that will spur all of us on toward holiness. It serves to purify the church. John Cassian, who lived from 360 – 435 A. D., said that "What is pure is corrupted much more quickly than what is corrupt is purified." This is the same principle that Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 15:33, where he writes, "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company ruins good morals.'" And it's that same thing he's saying in 1 Corinthians 5:6-7, "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened." The leaven of unrepentant sin will permeate a church and corrupt it, if it is not confronted. For the purpose of training in righteousness and for the purity of the church, it is necessary for the church to exercise discipline.

In addition to this, as discipline serves to purify the church, it also then serves to strengthen the witness of the church. If unbelievers know that the church ignores sin, minimizes sin, accommodates sin, then it just bolsters their claim that the church is full of hypocrites. And why would they want to be part of something like that? If the people in the church are living just like the people outside the church, then why should unbelievers have any interest in the church?

But if there is something radically different about the community of those who call themselves Christ-followers, then the church will reflect God's glory to those around us. We are sinners—we acknowledge that. And we are forgiven through the blood of Christ, and we are being changed into His likeness. And the accountability that we have within the church is a profound means of sanctification. Therefore as the world looks on and sees

us confessing sin and growing in holiness and loving one another and confronting sin in each other's lives, it should be a testimony to the massive impact that the Gospel is having upon us.

Church discipline is for the good of our corporate witness to non-Christians, and supremely for the glory of God by reflecting His holy character. What Jesus says in Matthew 5:14-16 is evidence of both of these points. "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." We want to help each other and preach the Gospel to each other and point one another to the joy of holiness so that others will see the glory of God.

How do we carry out Church Discipline?

Finally, let me mention some practical ways that each of us should be involved in this process. First of all, by examining your own life. Jay Adams, in his *Handbook of Church Discipline*, begins by talking about self-discipline. We should each be seeking to discipline ourselves in the fight of faith, the fight for greater joy in God. We should be ruthless and relentless in our battle against sin. Jesus stresses this when He says, "And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'" (Mark 9:43-48) He's using hyperbolic language here. He doesn't mean that we should literally cut off body parts, for that wouldn't get at the real problem anyway. But He is saying that we should take drastic measures to discipline ourselves in the fight for holiness. Paul said, "But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified." (1 Corinthians 9:27, ESV)

So we begin by looking at our own hearts and repenting of sin and confessing sin to the Lord and confessing sin to other believers and asking for personal accountability in our lives. We should welcome that from others. We should desire that others would confront our sin, as painful as that can be. We should want to be plugged into a small group where we can share our struggles and ask for advice and prayer and even admonishment.

Then, as we move from self-discipline to the steps of Matthew 18, we should pray for the wisdom and boldness to speak

the truth in love to those who are in sin. I ask you this morning, Is there someone you know of in this church who is sinning in some way and needs to be corrected? If so, don't gossip about it. Go to that person and say, "I care about you. I want the best for you. And I know that this sin in your life is going to make you miserable, and it's making your family miserable, and it slanders the reputation of Christ and His church. Do you see that? Do you see what you're doing? Will you turn from it?" Hopefully the person will respond positively to that, and you will have gained your brother or sister. If not, then you will need to take one or two others. That might mean taking a couple other people in your small group, or a couple of the elders. And if that step is unsuccessful, then it comes to the church, which happens through the elders. The elders would be involved by this point, and we would bring the situation to the attention of all the members.

This is what we'll be doing in the meeting following this worship service. There has been a situation that we've been involved in for some time. And as time has gone on it has become clearer that this individual is refusing to listen. There is not evidence of true repentance. Therefore, we're going to tell it to the church in the hopes that our corporate prayers and corporate confronting of this sin will bring this person to repentance. We won't be sharing every detail of the situation, but only enough to show why we're concerned and why we think it warrants this step of telling it to the church.

What we're NOT doing today is removing anyone from membership. There will be no vote today. No one will be excommunicated. We're simply telling it to the church, and our hope and prayer is that we won't ever get to that last step.

If, however, the individual remains unrepentant, and there aren't dramatic changes in their life, then at some point in the near future we will call another meeting to formally remove them from membership. We will deliver them over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that their spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. At that point the individual will still be welcome here, encouraged to come and sit under the preaching of God's Word, but they will be instructed not to partake of the Lord's Supper. They will be to us as a Gentile and a tax collector. And in terms of personal interaction with an individual who has been disciplined in this way, 1 Corinthians 5:11 says "not even to eat with such a one," which is to say we shouldn't have casual, friendly times of fellowship with them. Rather, when we meet with them it should be for the purpose of confronting sin and calling for repentance.

Those are some of the practical details of how we carry out church discipline, and if we get to that final step we'll say more about it then.

I want to close by encouraging all of us to view this in a positive light rather than a negative light. Church discipline is certainly a weighty and difficult task that we have as a church, but I hope we can see that it is so good that God has instructed us to do this. Imagine where we would each be without the accountability of other believers in our lives. Imagine the hypocrisy and immorality and heresy that we would fall into if we didn't have brothers and sisters around us to admonish us when we start to wander. We need this! I need this! I think of times when the other elders have given me gentle admonishments and when they ask me probing questions about my life in our accountability meetings. I think of the guys in my small group who care about my soul and pray for me and ask about how I'm doing as a husband and father. I think about my wife who is so attentive and aware of what's going on in my heart that she can bring things to light that are so helpful, even when it hurts some to hear it. I think of others in the church who have prayed for me in specific ways that spur me on in my pursuit of holiness. At men's breakfast and at our Tuesday morning prayer time, men praying for my marriage and my family and my purity and humility and faithfulness to the Gospel. I need that. And I'm so thankful to have it.

There's no better place to be than in a community of believers where I know that people will hold me accountable to stay on the straight and narrow path that I so desperately want to stay on. Isn't that a beautiful thing? I want to be on that straight and narrow path, but the world the flesh and devil are trying their best to get me off that path. So I don't want to be on my own. I want the help and the encouragement and the camaraderie of a community of believers who are going to hold me accountable. I hope you want that, too. And I hope that what we've learned this morning and what we'll discuss in our meeting later will serve to bring about repentance, as well as instruct us in righteousness, purify our church, strengthen our witness, and ultimately glorify God.