

Chapter 12: Here We Stand On Church Discipline

Matthew 18:15-20

Church discipline is both modeled and demanded in the New Testament. When it comes to church discipline, a church faces two options, and only two options. We can practice church discipline in obedience to God or we can neglect church discipline and be disobedient to God. It really is that simple.

Before I get any further into this message, let me openly confess before you that we have not always been as diligent in practicing church discipline as we should have. We *have* practiced church discipline multiple times, but we have not, however, always been as diligent with church discipline as we should have been. I make that confession with great regret and sorrow, and I think that I speak for all of our elders. The primary reason we were not as diligent with church discipline as we should have been, relates to the fact that we were not as diligent with member care – shepherding God’s flock – as we should have been. We cannot do a good job with church discipline until we do a good job with member care. I want to assure you that member care (shepherding the flock that God has given us) has become a top priority of the Elders. We are praying for and seeking more non-staff Elders to bring on board, from the congregation, to help us with the current feeling of being overwhelmed with this responsibility.

Having shared this failure, and having assured you that we are diligently working toward doing it right, I want to present in this message what we believe “doing it right” looks like.

Dr. Al Mohler, the President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, gives a great summary of why the majority of today’s churches no longer practice church discipline.

The decline of church discipline is perhaps the most visible failure of the contemporary church. No longer concerned with maintaining purity of confession or lifestyle, the contemporary church sees itself as a voluntary association of autonomous members, with minimal moral accountability to God, much less to each other.

[From an article entitled *Missing the Mark*]

Notice those words, “...a voluntary association of autonomous members, with minimal moral accountability to God, much less to each other.” In other words, the concept that joining a church is becoming a part of a local manifestation of the body of Christ and putting oneself under the authority of the church, has largely been rejected in evangelical Christianity. Joining a church in today’s culture is like joining a club or a

fraternal organization where we do what we like, when we like, and it really is no one else's business.

It is interesting that in one of the confessions of the church during the Protestant Reformation (the Belgic Confession of 1561), the marks of a true church are given. We would do well to listen carefully.

The marks by which the true church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only head of the church. Hereby the true church may certainly be known...

[Quoted in Mohler article, *Missing the Mark*, page 11]

That is certainly not the way the church is thought of today. We have strayed from our biblical roots. If time allowed, we could go into the history of our denomination and see that there was a time when church discipline was the norm in our churches, rather than the exception. In pre-civil war days, Southern Baptists put out of the church almost 2% of the membership every year and yet, during that same time period, experienced tremendous growth at twice the rate of the population growth [Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, page 165]

Before we delve into the details of church discipline, we need to see that there are two types of church discipline. First, *directive discipline* is constantly going on in the church. It is the normal day to day confrontations in love that take place between members of the body. Second, there is *corrective discipline* that is a more formal procedure that takes place regarding certain sins that have more consequence when it comes to the reputation of Christ in the world and the health of the church. To put it in terms of the physical body, directive discipline is more like admonitions to eat correctly and exercise. Corrective discipline is more like surgery [adapted from Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church*, page 67] It is corrective discipline that we are focusing on in this message.

I. The Purpose of Church Discipline

In the short run, it is easier to just ignore church discipline. Believe me, in this day where most church members see the church as, "a voluntary association of autonomous members, with minimal moral accountability to God, much less to each other," we can expect conflict, misunderstanding, and out of control emotions when we obey God in this area. Why is ignoring church discipline not an option for a church that desires to please God? What is the purpose of church discipline?

A. Church Discipline Upholds the Reputation of God

As God's adopted children, we must take seriously our Father's reputation in the world. Let's face it; the world primarily forms its opinions about God from observing the lives of those who profess to be His children. When people in the church do that which even the world recognizes as wrong, the world never sees the holiness of our God. The church must take seriously the reputation of God in the world. One of the horrible

consequences of David's sin of adultery with Bathsheba was stated by the prophet Nathan when he confronted David. 2 Samuel 12:14a: "However, because by this deed you have given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme..." Our behavior affects God's reputation in the world. The basic motivation behind all corrective church discipline is the glory of God. We must not allow the actions of one who claims to be His child cause His name to be blasphemed by unbelievers.

B. Church Discipline Is a Retardant for Sin

In both the Old, and New Testaments, sin in Israel (Old Testament), and in the church (New Testament) is compared to leaven, or as it is better known today, yeast. Just as yeast spreads throughout all of the dough, even so ignored, unrepentant sin spreads through the church and is not taken seriously when church discipline is ignored.

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul is dealing with blatant sin that was being ignored in the church. After admonishing them to deal with the sinning member, he says in 1 Corinthians 5:6-7a (NIV): "Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast--as you really are." In 1 Timothy 5, Paul is referring to elders who have unrepentant sin and says in 1 Timothy 5:20 (NASB): "Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of *sinning*."

C. Church Discipline Facilitates the Restoration of a Sinning Brother or Sister

The goal of church discipline is the restoration of the sinning member. The goal is not to excommunicate them from the church (though that may happen if they refuse to repent). Some people say church discipline is like soldiers shooting their wounded. Bob Russell has a good rebuttal for that. "Confronting a [sinning church member] is not shooting the wounded; it is trying to prevent fatalities. It is removing the bullet and disinfecting the wound." [Bob Russell, Source unknown] Amen!

If the person who is the subject of the discipline is unrepentant, they are put out of the church, but if after being put out, they genuinely repent, they are to be restored. Church discipline, as it is presented in the Scripture, is not like a group of self-righteous spiritual policemen out to punish a criminal in the church; it is a group of broken hearted brothers and sisters seeking to restore a sinning member of the family. Jesus said in Matthew 18:15b, that when the sinning member repents, "...you have gained your brother." Paul, in Galatians 6:1 writes about restoring a sinning brother and the Greek word translated "restore" literally means to set a broken bone so it can heal and thus function as it was meant to function.

II. The Provocation of Church Discipline

I've heard people say something like this, "Sin is sin; no one sin is worse than another." I think I understand what they mean by that. All sin is truly offensive to an infinitely holy God, and no sin should be excused. However, there are some sins that have greater consequences than others. While many sins should be dealt with through directive discipline, not every sin calls for corrective church discipline. When we examine the

Scriptures, the sins that call for corrective discipline seem to be the sins that have a harmful, public effect on God's reputation and the congregation. To put it another way, the sins that call for formal corrective discipline are those public sins that harm the reputation of Christ and His church. Those sins can be summarized in three categories.

A. When God's Truth Is Twisted – False Teaching

A church must protect the purity of what is being taught in the church. I am talking here about the fundamentals of the faith, not the timing of the rapture. The New Testament is filled with warnings and directives for dealing with false doctrine in the church. 2 Peter 2:1: "But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, *and* bring on themselves swift destruction." These false teachers creep in undetected.

Jude 1:4: "For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ." When a member of the church is teaching false doctrine, especially in a fundamental of the faith, they should be confronted in love, taken out of any official teaching position, and forbidden to teach their false doctrine. If the false teacher refuses to repent, corrective church discipline must be exercised. This would go beyond those who hold an official teaching position; it would include one who is informally meeting with members and teaching them what is false.

We read about two false teachers who were disciplined by the Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 1:20: "of whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme." We are told what provoked this discipline at least on the part of Hymenaeus in 2 Timothy 2:17-18: "And their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, who have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some."

We see the biblical view toward those who teach false doctrine especially in the area of the fundamental truth of the Gospel in Galatians 1:8-9 (NIV):

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!

B. When God's Holiness Is Ignored – Flagrant Sin

When a member of the church is involved in moral impurity that is bringing reproach on Christ and grieving the Spirit of God, they need to be confronted with directive love, taught the Scriptures, and encouraged to repent. If they rebel against the Scriptures and thus against God and refuse to repent, then corrective love (church discipline) is begun.

In 1 Corinthians 5, we are told of a man at Corinth who was involved in moral impurity and was bringing reproach on Christ. We see what his sin was in 1 Corinthians 5:1 (ESV): "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife." This church member was committing sexual immorality with his step mother!

Paul said that even those outside the church recognize this as abominable. Paul gave instructions as to what was to be done with this sinning member that was bringing open reproach upon Christ and His church at Corinth. 1 Corinthians 5:11-13 (ESV):

But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. Purge the evil person from among you.”

In the next point, we will see exactly how to do that. In addition to the man committing immorality with his stepmother, there are other examples of sin that call for church discipline. The word translated “sexual immorality” is an umbrella term for all sexual sin – pre-marital sex, adultery, and homosexuality. “Greed” seems to refer to a person who will do anything for money (honest or dishonest). An idolater would refer to one involved with false religion or a cult. A reviler is a person who is known for his abusive filthy speech. The Phillips paraphrase renders it “a man with a foul tongue.” A drunkard is one who is given over to drunkenness (not one who is struggling, seeking help and yet sometimes stumbles). A “swindler” is a thief, an embezzler or an extortioner. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but a representative list of sins that bring reproach on Christ and His church. Again, we are speaking of sins like these that the member refuses to genuinely repent of.

C. When God’s Desired Unity Is Undermined – Fellowship Disruptions

When a church member is divisive and has a pattern of disrupting the fellowship of the church, they must be lovingly confronted with directive love by showing them the Scriptures, but if they refuse to repent, and continue in rebellion, corrective discipline takes over. Titus 3:10-11 (ESV): “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.” Romans 16:17-18 (ESV): “I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.”

These are the three areas that according to Scripture require corrective discipline if there is a refusal to repent.

III. The Process of Church Discipline

Once we see the purpose of church discipline and the provocation of church discipline, we need to see the process by which that corrective discipline is carried out. I believe that we see the normative process detailed in Matthew 18:15-17, but I believe that some offenses are so damaging and often so public that discipline must be expedited. In 1 Corinthians 5, where the man was living in sexual immorality with his step mother, there are no steps commanded. The church is commanded by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:5

(ESV): “you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” To deliver him to Satan is to put him out of the church, and the protection of the church, and into the realm that Satan is in control (he is called “the god of this world” in 2 Corinthians 4:4).

Having given that exception, I believe that the discipline process is not to be hurried. Jesus gives us the normal steps of corrective discipline in Matthew 18:15-17.

A. Corrective Discipline Begins with a Private Confrontation (Matthew 18:15)

Sin in the Body of Christ is against God first of all, but secondly, it is against every member of the body. We are parts of a whole and no one’s sinful actions affect only them. I am convinced that if just this first step was taken in the church 90% of all sin problems could be dealt with. Before we go to the sinning brother or sister, we are to examine our own lives so that we are not being hypocritical and then to make sure that our motive is love. 1 Corinthians 16:14 (ESV): “Let all that you do be done in love.”

B. Corrective Discipline Continues with Two or Three Witnesses (Matthew 18:16)

By the second step, there is obvious rebellion since they have not repented after having the first confrontation and appeal to repent. The purpose of the witnesses is to protect against there being a personal vendetta, misunderstandings, or making too much of a minor issue. This second step also shows the sinning member the seriousness of the situation when he is lovingly confronted with three or four people who are pleading with him to repent.

C. Corrective Discipline Moves to the Whole Church (Matthew 18:17)

How this is carried out is left up to each church and the situation. I don’t think that it involves giving all the details of the sin. It should therefore be left to the Elders of each church as determine the details. The principle is that the church begins to pray for this person and those, who were not aware of the problem, should confront the person, and encourage them to repent. The sinning member should be inundated with expressions of love and admonitions to repent by the whole body.

Sadly, if the unrepentant member refuses to repent after the church is brought in on the situation, they are put out of the church (excommunication). This last step is always done with grief and the assurance that, when there is repentance, the rebellious member will be received with open arms and love. When Jesus said in Matthew 18:17b: “But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.”, He is saying that he is to be treated as an unbeliever and prayed for diligently that his eyes will be opened and that he will repent. Normally, the corrective discipline is not for committing a sin; it is for refusing to repent of sin. When the church is told to treat the unrepentant member as a heathen and tax collector, it is talking about what we saw in 1 Corinthians 5:11 (ESV): “But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother ... not even to eat with such a one.” They need to sense the

loss of fellowship with other members of the body as a consequence of their refusal to repent.

Conclusion

Here we stand on church discipline. May God give us the wisdom, courage, and resolve to deal with sinning brothers and sisters in love and compassion as we obey the directives of Scripture.