

Matthew 18:15-20 – “Church Discipline” – Apr. 7, 2024

1. The longer we are on the path of sequential expository preaching, the more convinced I am that this is the normal diet the church should be on
 - a. Benefits of expository preaching
2. Last section of Matthew 18 showed concern for a straying sheep
 - a. If the shepherd loves the sheep, he will go and pursue it
 - b. Now Jesus moves that logic into the church to show us what it looks like to love an erring sheep
 - c. “Love” is one of those things that must be defined by the author of love and not by the world.
 - i. What we’re about to look at this morning is a very practical manual of how Christians are to love each other when sin has entered the camp
3. Many people hear the words church discipline and either
 - a. Chuckle because they think this is some primitive notion from days gone by and is no longer relevant today
 - b. Get uptight because they’ve seen church discipline practiced in an unbiblical way
 - c. Many hear the words “church discipline” and they automatically equate it with “excommunication”
 - d. Hopefully we can align our thinking with Scripture this morning
4. We are going to see that church discipline isn’t like a light switch where it’s either on or off
 - a. It’s more like a tap on your sink – it opens and closes gradually according to the need

- b. We have never excommunicated someone from Trinity (hopefully never need to)
 - c. But we have practiced church discipline every single Sunday for just over 2 years now
 - d. Church discipline goes through increasing levels of intensity
 - i. Formative – the teaching and discipling ministry of the church
 - ii. Corrective – dealing with sin or false teaching that has shown up
 - 1. Private Admonition
 - 2. Public Admonition
 - 3. Suspension
 - 4. Excommunication
 - e. What we'll see in today's passage is that it is important to work with as little force and with as little publicity as possible, and only advance to the next step if the offending party makes it necessary
 - f. Once again, for the most part I have seen people here honouring this model, and so we are at a good place to work through this passage
 - i. I have seen first hand how people at Trinity have worked through these steps properly
5. V.15 – “*If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.*”
- a. It is inevitable that when people are in proximity to one another, there will be disagreements and bumps along the way
 - b. When these happen, we have two legitimate options and one illegitimate option
 - i. Cover

- ii. Confront
 - iii. Complain
- c. Offense can be given, and offense can be taken, and we need to be careful to think through what is happening when there's an offense
 - i. This is especially true in an age where being offended gives people tremendous power
 - ii. Sometimes offense can be given, but not taken
 - 1. Eg. – Person A says something rude and insulting, but Person B chooses to cover the offense and move on
 - iii. Sometimes offense can be taken, but not given
 - 1. Eg. – Person A carefully explains a biblical notion that runs contrary to the spirit of the age, and Person B chooses to feel insulted about it
- d. As Christians who want to live peaceably and obey God's law, we need to be cautious not to give offense nor to take offense
- e. Jesus isn't saying here that every single grievance needs to become an ordeal
- f. Rather, He says "*if your brother sins against you*"
 - i. That is, it is an actual offense according to the Word of God
 - ii. This certainly can include being rude or quarrelsome, but it really includes anything where a Christian brother (or sister) has acted contrary to God's Law

- g. If an actual sin has occurred, and if we are actually concerned for the glory of God and the health of His people, we have a responsibility to do something about it
- h. Some feel like this process can't really get started because of Jesus warning that we should not remove a speck from our brother's eye when we have a plank in our own (Matthew 7:3-5)
 - i. Some also object that because we are all sinful, we really can't practice this kind of accountability or church discipline
 - ii. But read that closely and you'll see that Jesus doesn't say we can't correct one another, but rather that we should take care of our own sin before confronting others
 - iii. The standard is not sinless perfection but genuine repentance and the pursuit of holiness in our own lives
 - iv. There is also the challenge of those hidden sins that don't get dealt with
 - 1. But this is no excuse to disobey the instructions here
 - 2. It is impossible to deal with hidden sins
 - 3. We can only deal with those that become known, and we must deal with them according to the instructions we're given here
 - 4. If other sins show themselves down the road, we'll deal with them then
 - 5. As long as we are committed to a biblical standard of justice, nobody in the church gets special protection, and nobody in the church gets special scrutiny

6. Even elders can and should be part of this process
 - a. If we do or say something in error, those in the church should follow this exact same process
 - i. Christ says the place to start is a one-on-one conversation
 - j. This accomplishes several things
 - i. Prevents gossip
 - ii. Prevents bitterness
 - iii. Prevents escalation
 - iv. Promotes reconciliation
 1. That is the goal in all the different levels of engagement. The goal is always to win your brother, even when we get to the final step of excommunication.
 2. Reconciliation gets much harder when other people get involved prematurely, or if bitterness has built up, or if gossip has been spreading.
 - k. The best part about fixing things at this step is how simple it is! You don't need to involve other people, you don't need to talk to the elders, you don't need to go over 2 years of built-up grievances
 1. You just take note of the situation, and you go talk to the offending party in anticipation of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation!
 - m. We can help each other with this as well
 - i. Story of Doug Wilson's mother
 1. "Let's go talk with them right now!"

- ii. If someone complains about a brother or sister in front of you, then cut it off immediately and encourage them to go talk to the other person directly
 - n. Again, reconciliation is the goal in this step and every other step as well
6. V.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.*”
- a. If one-on-one reconciliation is impossible, we are instructed to “open the tap” a little more, and to add one or two additional people in the process
 - b. The way Christ teaches us to move ahead is interesting
 - i. The standard of just weights and measures and establishing justice is taken from the OT law
 - 1. Deut. 17:6
 - 2. *Lex talionis* – Deut. 19:15-21 – “*A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established. 16 If a malicious witness arises to accuse a person of wrongdoing, 17 then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days. 18 The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, 19 then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil3 from your midst. 20 And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you. 21 Your eye*

shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.”

3. The standard of two or three witnesses is to show that this isn't just a personal axe to grind, but there is a willingness to get outside people involved to help assess the situation
 - a. “two or three” likely has to do with how independent the witnesses are
 - i. For example, “Matt & Clint” would count as one witness; as would “Mike & Courtney”
 - b. Independent witnesses also keeps things from escalating from reconciliation to revenge, also in accord with the “lex talionis”
4. Bringing in additional people brings perspective and sound judgment, and also prevents us from rushing to conclusions
 - a. Prov. 18:17 – “*The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him.*”
 - b. Prov. 11:14 – “*Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.*”
7. V.17, 18 – “*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. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*”

- a. If the collective wisdom of two or three are not compelling to the offending party, then the tap must be opened up further
- b. Now it goes to the church, and Jesus' language of binding and loosing takes us back to His "I Will Build My Church and the Gates of Hell Shall Not Prevail" sermon in Matthew 16:19
- c. After Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ, Jesus employs a play on words says He will build His church on the rock that is Peter
- d. Peter is the first rock that is laid in the "*foundation*" of the apostles (Eph. 2:20)
- e. While apostleship clearly ends with the apostles of the 1st century, their extraordinary office comes to be replaced by the ordinary office of elder
 - i. So by "*telling it to the church*", I think we are still dealing with degrees
 - ii. I don't think this means to publicize it to everyone all at once, but rather, take it to the elders first
- f. If things are functioning well, most correction and confrontation for sin shouldn't involve the elders of the church – it should be one-on-one private conversations
- g. But if that doesn't work, and bringing one or two others doesn't work, then it is appropriate to involve the elders of the church
 - i. The elders should also work with as little force as is needed to bring about repentance
 - 1. Counseling
 - 2. Rebuke
 - 3. Suspension from the Lord's Table
 - 4. Excommunication

- ii. The goal here still is restoration all the way through
 - 1. The hope is that by removing the benefits and the graces of church life, that the offending party will be softened and reconciled
- iii. By the time someone is suspended from the Lord's Table, the broader church should become aware of what is happening, and certainly by the time it gets to excommunication, the membership of the church needs to be involved
 - 1. This is a very sober step, and is the strongest tool the church possesses
 - 2. The person is to be treated as a Gentile and a tax collector
 - 3. In 1 Corinthians 5, the instruction is to have nothing to do with such a person, not even to eat with them
 - 4. Again, this is not for revenge but to make sin hurt deeply enough that it will stir softness in their heart
 - a. 1 Cor. 5:5 uses very vivid language – the person being put out of the church is to be handed over to Satan so that he will ultimately be saved
 - b. The logic is that the terror of seeing life outside of Christ will bring these people back to repentance, fellowship, and full inclusion in the people of God
 - c. If their lives basically carry on as normal, no incentive is given to be restored to Christ and His church

iv. It should also be noted that by this point, there is really only one sin that forces the pressure to keep up – impenitence

1. This process could theoretically be started over any sin, but as things intensify it really becomes about the unwillingness to submit to God's law

v. V.18 shows just how serious it is for the church to excommunicate

1. God says He will bind in heaven whatever is bound on earth
2. This is not a promise that the church always gets it right
3. However, it is saying that God has so strongly invested His authority into the local church, that to the degree that they are honouring His Word, God's judgment is the same as the church's
4. For the church to get to this point, they are saying that to the best of their knowledge, based on the way someone is living, they have no reason to believe that this person is saved
 - a. As such, they can no longer allow this person to remain in the church and pollute the name of Christ
 - b. This is ultimately the function of church discipline – to restore the backslider and to protect the name of Christ
 - c. Excommunication is the church's declaration that the person is not saved, and if the church binds this person in accordance with Scripture, then God has the same judgment on the matter. God puts His stamp on approval on the church's determination

- d. In our time, because church discipline is largely ignored, people find it easy to escape by running off to a different church who may be very eager to take in another person and won't bother asking the necessary questions
- 5. discipline happens in the context of a particular local church, but if churches are functioning properly, they should honour each other in this as well
 - a. This is why we guard the Communion Table each time we take the Lord's Supper and warn that this is not open for those who are currently under church discipline
 - b. We want to respect the decisions of other churches as well, lest we become guilty of the same sins as the Corinthian church and eat and drink judgment on ourselves
- h. As always, there is a ditch on either side here
 - i. Some churches and some periods of history have been known for being too eager and too hasty to practice discipline
 - 1. Maybe this has even been with good motives
 - 2. A keen sense of the horrors of hell may encourage some to be zealous about sparing people from that outcome, and taking drastic measures to intervene
 - 3. But we see here that at each step, we always work with the lowest pressure possible, not the highest pressure possible

- ii. Some churches and some periods of history have been known for being careless and complacent in practicing discipline
 - 1. This usually happens alongside an indifferent view of the holiness of God, with a casual approach to worship and to church, and a diminished view of hell
 - 2. We currently live in such a time
 - 3. But this is not an excuse to overcorrect
 - i. Guarding against both pitfalls is necessary, even in the same church
 - i. In 1 Corinthians, Paul had to instruct the church to remove a man who was living an immoral lifestyle. They were being careless in their duties to guard the church.
 - ii. After they removed the man, the excommunication worked and he repented, but the church refused to let him back in, so Paul had to write them back in a second letter telling them to let him back
 - j. We should also remember here that because the goal is restoration, that once there is genuine repentance by the offending person, he or she is indeed welcome back
 - i. Church discipline isn't meant to be a kind of purgatory or payment system
 - ii. It is a sharp jolt to the system to kick start the conscience and the soul
 - iii. If and when the person repents, the church has a duty to take them back, and not to make them serve a sentence of so-and-so much time before their penalty is over
 - iv. The restoration needs to move ahead at the time of repentance
 - k. In other words, the loosing needs to be taken just as seriously as the binding

- i. Christ's words in Matthew 16:16 and here in 18:18 does not make the church infallible nor does it make her elders infallible
 1. But it does convey very serious and very real authority to close the doors of the kingdom on those who refuse to bend the knee to Christ and to open the doors of the kingdom to those who share Peter's confession that Jesus Christ is Lord.
 2. In terms of practical application, this shows the importance of the practice of church membership
 - a. We have been intentionally cautious on this front because we know and understand how much church difficulty people have experienced, and this was intensified over the last few years
 - b. We understand this and have felt and still feel no desire to push people on this front
 - c. At the same time, passages like this presuppose that the church has identifiable members
 - d. It is presupposed that for churches to function in a healthy manner, two lists of names exist that are known
 - i. Elders
 - ii. Members
 - e. Of course, this doesn't rule out the idea that fellow Christians can challenge each other if they don't presently belong to a church or if they belong to another church, but

for each local church to work well, the fact of elders and members is assumed so there can be mutual accountability, congregational care, etc.

- i. So wherever you're currently at, I'd encourage you to keep thinking about church membership
- ii. If you consider this church your home and these people to be your brothers and sisters, then I hope you feel comfortable making that pledge to these people through membership
- iii. If you're not ready, we'll continue to care for you and pray for you and shepherd you and trust that your level of comfort and ease and desire for mutual accountability will continue to move ahead

1. The binding and loosing here are both important
 - i. We should not be slow to start low pressure correction when a brother or sister is straying. The Lord commands it for our good and His glory. Most of the time this happens in the context of Christian friendship and does not need to involve the elders of the church.
 - ii. We should not be slow to open the doors when a brother or sister has received the Lord. The Lord commands it for our good and His glory.
8. VV. 19, 20 – “*Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.*”

- a. Again, the Lord Jesus so closely identifies Himself with His bride that when His church lawfully decides on a matter, He puts His stamp on that decision
- b. Perhaps we may be reminded here of Numbers 30 where instructions are given on vows
 - i. If a woman makes a vow on behalf of her household, her husband has a window to overturn it
 - ii. But all things being equal, if things are working well, then he invests his authority in his wife and trusts her enough to honour her vows
- c. This is a model of Christ and His bride
 - i. He retains the right to correct us when we err
 - ii. But all things being equal, He has invested His authority to His bride and has entrusted her and empowered her to manage the household of earthly matters
- d. The reference to the “*two or three*” in vv. 19 & 20 is frequently misapplied
 - i. It is correct that no matter how small a gathering of believers, God is there in their midst
 - ii. In the Jewish synagogue system, 10 adult men were required to create a worshipping community
 - iii. It is true that it does not take 10 adult men for Jesus to be present among His people. He is right there when three praying grandmothers get together and pray for their families and their church.
 - iv. But we must go even further
 - 1. It does not take two or three for Christ to be present.

2. He is always present.
 - e. This is not a verse about the omnipresence of God, as true as that is.
 - i. This verse is in the context of church discipline
 - ii. This is about wisdom and discretion as the church exercises her responsibility of managing the keys of the kingdom. The “two or three” has to do with witnesses and proper standards of biblical justice.
 - iii. The two or three here is a reference to the elders of the church as they shepherd the church through the binding and loosing process
9. This is a heavy passage, but as Christ knows He is moving towards His cross, the intensity and the weight and the seriousness of His instructions to the church also come into focus
 - a. The Great Shepherd is finishing His apprenticeship program for the under-shepherds
 - b. It will not be long before He is gone and they will have to manage without Him
 - c. Yet we are not entirely without Him
 - d. He is not physically present, and elders and overseers do not have the supernatural gifting of the apostles
 - e. But He has given us both His Word and His Holy Spirit
 - f. In a very real way He is present with us, even when we must walk through the difficult task of correcting those who are straying

10. CHARGE

- a. *Christ has been preaching about His concern for the little ones in Matthew 18. He has just told us how the Shepherd is so concerned for one straying sheep that He*

will leave the ninety-nine to go pursue it. That is what church discipline is – the Shepherd’s heart to correct and restore the straying one. God’s way of achieving restoration runs contrary to the sentimental and therapeutic sensibilities of our age. But it is Christ, not man, who is building His church, so we must follow the instructions we are given instead of presume to create our own. We have seen a concern for correction but also for gentleness. There are steps of increasing seriousness as open sin is rooted from the camp, but each step is committed to using as little force as possible. The need to increase the pressure lies with the offender and not the offended; impenitence leads to further measures but softness of heart and repentance leads to restoration and reconciliation. The charge for each one of us is to have the gracious courage to live up to Jesus’s words. Let us not presume to be sheep who are wiser than the Shepherd. Let us have the grace and humility to always deal seriously, yet graciously with straying brothers and sisters. And may it always be done with restoration as the purpose. Christ will bind us together as we work for the good of His people and the glory of His name.

11. BENEDICTION

- a. Romans 15:5, 6 – “*May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, 6 that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*”