

Ecclesiology

Topic 4 – Church Discipline

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Types of Discipline

The Biblical concept of discipline (see Heb 12:4-11) is a means to provide instruction, with the intent of forming habits of biblical behavior, of providing guidance for responsible living, of guiding toward maturity. At one end of the spectrum it describes the training that occurs by teaching, instructing, educating or nurturing and at the other end of the spectrum the training that occurs by utilizing correction and punishment if necessary.

Some view there to be two types of discipline within the body of Christ: formative and corrective.

Formative Discipline

“Formative discipline” is the process of bringing people to maturity through positive instruction and teaching. This is the “teaching to observe all that I commanded” part of disciple making. This is accomplished through corporate and individual ministry. It is occurring all the time within the body of Christ as the natural outflow of Biblically organized and functioning local bodies comprised of individuals who are walking in the Spirit.

¹¹And 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;** Eph 4:11-12

²⁴**and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds,** ²⁵not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near. Heb 10:24-25

¹⁸And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹**speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord;** ²⁰always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; Eph 5:18-19

²⁸We proclaim Him, **admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.** ²⁹For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me. Col 1:28-29

¹⁶Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, **with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another** with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. ¹⁷Whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. Col 3:16-17

Here in Colossians 3, teaching means to provide instruction, impart positive truth, in a formal or informal setting. Inherent is the intent to influence understanding with the aim to shape the will of one taught. “Admonish” conveys the ideas of encouraging, advising, and warning people of the consequences of their behavior. It speaks of encouraging counsel in view of sin and coming punishment; counsel with a warning involved. The word implies a definite exhortation, correction, and warning. When it is used, there is always the implication of a problem. It presupposes an obstacle that must be removed or changed. The only requirement to be able to “teach” and “admonish” is to be Spirit-filled (allowing the words of Christ to richly dwell within you).

Corrective Discipline

“Corrective discipline” is the specific reproof (to expose or confront sin) or rebuke (stronger than reprove and includes a sharp, severe reprimand with possibly of impending penalty) of a particular member of the body because of sin. Sometimes corrective discipline is informal when one member of the body tells another that what they are doing is sin and calls them to repent. Other times it is formal, following a prescribed Biblical pattern.

Both formative and corrective discipline are expressions of love within the body Christ. Love is the sacrificial commitment of my will to another’s needs and best interests regardless of the cost to myself. Love seeks another’s highest good, even if it costs a great deal; even if there is no response of love or gratitude. Love is not an impulse from the feelings. It does not always run with the natural inclinations nor does it spend itself only upon those whom we like or deem worthy to receive love. It is an act of the will, so we can choose to love even if we do not feel like doing it.

A significant demonstration of love between believers is be concerned about each another’s walk with Christ and therefore enter into difficult conversations and actions that are best for each other.

Later in our series we will discuss the one-another ministries within the body, but today we will focus on the formal form of corrective discipline which is usually called “church discipline” or “restoration ministry”. This is the formal process of holding individual believers accountable to God’s Word.

The Purpose of Church Discipline

Church discipline is practiced because it is commanded: Jesus told His disciples to do so in Matthew 18:15-20 and the Holy Spirit through Paul instructed this in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, Titus 3:10-11, and 1 Thessalonians 5:14. Obeying Christ requires practicing church discipline. The basis of all discipline is the holiness and love of God. Obeying Christ in church discipline is loving our neighbor as ourselves. To the world, to mind one’s own business and ignore sin may appear to be kind and caring but in fact truly demonstrates a lack of care for our brother or sister in Christ.

There are several reasons that the Lord instructed that we practice church discipline:

1. Church discipline is commanded to guard and preserve God’s name and honor.

²Many will follow their sensuality, and **because of them the way of the truth will be maligned;** 2 Pet 2:2

²¹you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? ²²You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³**You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God?** ²⁴**For “THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU,” just as it is written.** Rom 2:21-24

2. Church discipline is commanded because of Christ’s love for His sheep and the restoration of the unrepentant sinner. In Matthew 18:15 it is clear that the individual who has chosen to willfully sin has already been lost to us in a practical sense as a brother, for it says, “if he listens to you, you have won your brother.” Church discipline is not punitive, but remedial. Church discipline is designed to move a true believer back to the path of perseverance. The rebuking and even the disfellowshipping is all performed with the hope that there might be true repentance, so that we might once again enjoy true fellowship (1 John 1:7).

¹⁵“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, **you have won your brother.** Matt 18:15

³²But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world. 1 Cor 11:32

3. Church discipline is commanded to maintain the purity of the church. In 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, it is clear that those who choose to continue to willfully disregard God's teaching will have a negative, leavening effect on the church. In other words, the church will become infected with the same sinful condition. The rebuking and even the disfellowshipping is performed with the hope that others would be spared the infection of sin.

⁴In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵*I have decided* to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. ⁶Your boasting is not good. **Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?** ⁷**Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are *in fact* unleavened.** For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. 1 Cor 5:4-7

4. Church discipline is commanded to restrain others from sinning. Church discipline helps the willfully-sinning, unrepentant believer, but also aids the body in perseverance.

¹⁹Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. ²⁰Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, **so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning.** 1 Tim 5:19-20

¹¹Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil. Eccles 8:11

Though discipline has a proper and beneficial place in the development of righteousness, it is largely ignored in the church and in local churches. This leads not only to severe consequences in the life of the wayward brother, but also to an ever increasing toleration of willful sin in the local church fellowship, even to the extent that it becomes acceptable.

The Process of Church Discipline

Let's look at the specifics of applying church discipline.

Church discipline is only to be applied to other Christians. Love displayed to non-Christians drives believers toward evangelism. Love displayed to believers drives other believers toward concern about their spiritual walks:

¹⁵**If your brother sins**, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. Matt 18:15

¹**Brethren, even if anyone** is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; *each one* looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Gal 6:1

The Scripture tells us that if a brother sins, we are to go to him and reprove him (Matt 18:15). It does not say a member or frequent attender, it simply says a brother. If a brother in Christ has committed willful sin, we have the responsibility of rebuke, even though he may not even go to our local church. We have the same responsibility toward the body of Christ.

It is not unusual for an individual to stop attending a fellowship when they are knowingly rebelling. Discipline should not be ignored, for it still can be very effective. It must be admitted, however, that if a brother in Christ is presently attending another church that the procedure of discipline may be disrupted, but this does not remove the responsibility to go as far as possible in following God's clear guidelines. We are able to minister to the person individually and with two or three witnesses, even without the cooperation of their local church.

The following criteria regarding the sin must be met before Matthew 18:15-20 can be applied:

1. The sin must be willful. Not all sin that is committed in the body of Christ is willful. A clear distinction in respect to sin is drawn in 1 Thessalonians 5:14.

¹⁴We urge you, brethren, **admonish the unruly**, **encourage the fainthearted**, **help the weak**, be patient with everyone. 1 Thess 5:14

The first group mentioned is the “unruly”. “Unruly” literally means “out of step” or “out of order”. It describes people who are defiant and in rebellion against God. These people are living in unrepentant sin. They know they are sinning and they do not care. They are stiff-necked and refuse to agree with God that they are sinning and that He requires repentance. “Admonish” describes alerting someone of the serious consequences of their actions; to counsel about avoidance or cessation of an improper course of conduct. In context here, “admonish” would take on the idea of “rebuke”.

The second group is the “fainthearted”. “Fainthearted” literally means “little-spirited” or “small-souled”. It conveys the idea of despondent, weary, timid, discouraged, or worried. It describes people who feel their resources are too small for a given situation and therefore are despondent or discouraged. These people have been worn down by the circumstances of life. “Encourage” means to relate near, encourage, console (to serve as a source of comfort in disappointment, loss, sadness, trouble), and comfort.

The third group is the “weak”. “Weak” describes one's state of limited capacity to do or be something. It is also translated sick. These people are somehow deficient. It describes people who may struggle with abandoning sin and obeying God's will. A particular application of this would be those are weak in Christian liberty. “Help” describes strongly laying hold of the weak with the idea of supporting them.

The weak are to be helped and the fainthearted are to be encouraged. But the unruly (or rebellious) are to be admonished. When an individual knows the truth of God's Word and yet chooses to act in disobedience to it, there is no other recourse than discipline.

2. The sin must be an action expressly forbidden in God's Word (1 Cor 5:9-11). Though sinful thoughts and attitudes are clearly outside of God's desires for His children, an individual cannot be admonished until those thoughts and attitudes are expressed in word or in deed. This is because we are limited in knowing what may be in a man's heart (1 Sam 16:17) and what is in a man's heart will be expressed (Matt 15:15-20).

Discipline would also exclude areas of conscience where what might be sin for one would not be sin for another. For example, a man may be convicted that the Lord would not have him watch a particular TV program, therefore, for him to watch it would be sin for him. But we cannot confront others on the basis of his conscience (Rom 14:1-12). Therefore, we would not discipline a man for watching a particular TV program, but we would discipline a man for stealing a TV, for the Scriptures clearly teach us, “Thou shalt not steal.”

This would also exclude areas of righteousness that are relative. We could not discipline a man for not being loving. The reason is very simple: we all lack in the area of love and are at various stages of development. But though we would not discipline for being unloving, we could discipline a brother for performing an unloving act like being unfaithful to his wife.

Church discipline for the purpose of restoring a sinning believer's relationship with Christ, the loving act towards sinning brethren, is taught by Jesus in Matthew 18. The goal of church discipline is the restoration of the true believer to God as he/she repents from sin.

The context in which church discipline is taught includes:

- Dealing decisively and extremely with sin.

⁸“If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire. ⁹If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell. Matt 18:8-9

- Being concerned and caring for other believers.

¹⁰“See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven. ¹¹[For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.] Matt 18:10-11

- Value pursuing wayward believers.

¹²“What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying? ¹³If it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray. ¹⁴So it is not *the* will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish. Matt 18:12-14

The procedure is clearly spelled out in Matthew 18:15-20.

¹⁵“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. ¹⁶But 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. ¹⁷If 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. ¹⁸Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. ¹⁹“Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.” Matt 18:15-20

There are four steps that are to be fulfilled as needed.

Step 1 – Personal Contact (Matt 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.

The first step is an individual, private conversation that takes place when we are convinced that a fellow believer has performed an unrepentant, willful act of sin. This confrontation should be from the Word of God (Heb 4:12) and done in private. This should be done with a prayerful, gentle, humble, and introspective attitude.

¹Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, **restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.** Gal 6:1

¹“Do not judge so that you will not be judged. ²For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. ³Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ and behold, the log is in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, **first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.** Matt 7:1-5

This confrontation involves clearly exposing the brother's sin so that he is aware of it and calling him to repentance.

While the initial contact must be in private, this should not be understood to mean more than it says. It does not prohibit us from having contact with other people about the situation or to attempt to minister to others in light of the situation. Indeed, it is wise to listen to counsel (Prov 12:15) and this may prevent us from wrongly or ineffectively rebuking our brother. Of course, all of our communication must be for the purpose of edification (Eph 4:29) which rejects gossip.

If he/she does not listen (clearly meaning unrepentant), then go to step two.

Step 2 – Group Contact (Matt 18:16)

¹⁶But 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.

The second step is to confront with two or three individuals who are witnesses. These individuals are there to confirm every fact. They are to confirm to themselves that the act has been committed, that it is indeed sinful, and that it has been committed willfully and without repentance. They are to confirm to the sinning person that his behavior is outside the clear teaching of God's Word and that he needs to repent.

It is best that the individuals know the person well. The advantage of this is that the motivation of the confrontation is clearly one of love and concern. However, it is essential that these individuals be unbiased witnesses for this contact.

If he/she does not listen (clearly meaning unrepentant), then go to step three.

Step 3 – Church Contact (Matt 18:17)

¹⁷If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church;

The third step is to tell it to the church. The goal is to have every relationship in the church used by God to persuade the unrepentant brother toward repentance. Every relationship within the body should pursue the person aggressively and plead with the unrepentant believer to repent.

This is challenging. Who needs to be informed? The entire local body? Only those with a certain level of relationship? Only church leaders? Much prayer and wisdom is needed to apply this step in the discipline process. There are some passages that are helpful:

Matthew 18:17

The use of the word for church singular indicating the assembly is involved.

¹⁷If 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.

2 Thessalonians 3:6-15

Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians to the entire church (2 Thess 1:1). He gives instruction regarding church discipline in chapter 3. It appears that he asks the entire church to "take note" of anyone who does not obey his apostolic instruction (i.e. Scripture) in order to apply positive peer pressure to the unrepentant brother.

¹⁴If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, **take special note of that person and do not associate with him**, so that he will be put to shame. ¹⁵*Yet* do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother. 2 Thess 3:14-15

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

In 1 Corinthians, Paul is giving instruction regarding the church discipline of a man in an incestuous relationship with his step-mother. Paul calls on the entire church, when assembled together, to discipline the unrepentant sinner.

³For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. ⁴In the name of our Lord Jesus, **when you are assembled**, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵*I have decided* to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. 1 Cor 5:3-5

1 Timothy 5:19-20

In 1 Timothy, Paul addresses the case of an unrepentant elder. The elder is to be “rebuked in the presence of all” meaning the entire congregation.

¹⁹Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. ²⁰Those who continue in sin, **rebuke in the presence of all**, so that the rest also will be fearful *of sinning*. 1 Tim 5:19-20

While this allows the possibility of the entire church to be mobilized in the attempt to restore the sinning brother, it does not necessarily need to be with everyone in the church. However, this step must involve those in the church who have spiritual oversight of the church. At VBC, this is the church elders or those whom the elders have entrusted their oversight (such as a Growth Group leader). The church leaders will decide how to proceed so that the sinning brother will be ministered to the extent of his existing relationships within the church.

If he/she does not listen (clearly meaning unrepentant), then go to step four.

Step 4 – Non-Contact (Matt 18:17)

¹⁷... and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

The fourth and final step is to treat the sinning believer as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer. This is commonly referred to as “disfellowshipping”. The church at this point would have no further social contact with the individual. This is clear from 1 Corinthians 5:11 where we are instructed “not even to eat with such a one.”

This does not mean that if we see them that we cannot acknowledge them. We should not be rude, but every interaction should be brought back to their sin and unrepentance. It simply means that we are to keep our distance from them socially until they repent. We should never give the impression that the sin issue is not important.

This action on the part of the church, which severs the ties with the sinning brother and thrusts them into the world which is Satan’s domain, hopefully would lead them to a point of repentance.

If a person continues in unrepentant sin, this calls into question their profession of faith. Potentially, they never really exercised true saving faith. Ultimately, a denial of Christ is evidence that salvation never took place.

¹⁹They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us. 1 John 2:19

³³“But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven. Matt 10:33

A believer who loves enough to do the hard work to restore another sinning believer may see the fruit of a soul that is truly saved.

¹⁹My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, ²⁰let 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. James 5:19-20

Restoration

When repentance occurs, the discipline of the sin ends. Matthew 18:15-20 tells us if our brother would hear us, which clearly speaks of repentance, we gain a brother and the process of rebuking which would lead to disfellowshipping ceases. We should never discipline an individual who confesses his sin, repents, and brings forth the fruit of repentance, even if he has repeatedly failed in the past.

Repentance will be demonstrated by sorrow, earnestness, vindication, indignation, fear, longing, zeal, and avenging of wrong. Believers who repent of their sin against God (and other people) will seek to right the wrong caused by their sin and pursue relationship reconciliation and restoration with zeal.

¹⁰For the sorrow that is according to *the will of God* produces a repentance without regret, *leading* to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death. ¹¹For behold what **earnestness** this very thing, this **godly sorrow**, has produced in you: what **vindication of yourselves**, what **indignation**, what **fear**, what **longing**, what **zeal**, what **avenging of wrong!** In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter. 2 Cor 7:10-11

This restoration is clearly demonstrated in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 where the man who had been disciplined is restored following his repentance.

Factiousness

The process of church discipline appears to be more direct in cases of factiousness (Titus 3:10-11). This is due to the unique threat of division that a factious man poses to the church. While much of Matthew 18:15-20 remains applicable, care must be given in informing the church so that the unrepentant, divisive man can be rejected without harm to the unity of the fellowship.

¹⁰Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, ¹¹knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned. Titus 3:10-11

Summary

Church discipline, though clearly taught, is not easily embraced. Hebrews 12:11 tells us “all discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful” and yet though there will be momentary sorrow, this verse also says, “...yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.” Therefore, though it is not easy, we must obey God’s commands, trusting Him that His church will be served by practicing church discipline.

Questions to Ponder

1. What are reasons that people give for not practicing church discipline?
2. How does the Bible address those objections to church discipline?
3. When is it right to confront a brother or sister who has sinned?
4. What types of sins would require church discipline and what ones would not?
5. Read 1 Peter 4:8, how is this verse lived out in interpersonal relationships?