

**Church Discipline
Matthew 18:15-17**

This morning we will be focusing on church discipline and what the Scriptures have to say about it.

My hope is that when we have finished, we will better understand what church discipline is and why it is so important for us to practice it.

And why are we speaking about this topic this morning? Several weeks ago we informed you that a woman who has fellowshiped with us for many years had chosen to live in sin, and that we as a church were doing what we believe God would want us to do in seeking to restore her. And what was that? We believe that God would want us to seek to restore her through church discipline.

This is why we have chosen to focus on this particular topic this morning. We are attempting to take the recent events, which are very sad and has greatly effected certain members of this congregation, and turn these recent events into a teachable moment so that we might have a much better grasp on the importance of church discipline and that we might have a greater commitment to it in the hope, that as we practice the very thing that God in His Word has commanded, that not only will those professing believers who have foolishly chosen to live in sin be blessed but even we ourselves and the ministry God has entrusted to us will be blessed as well.

So let us begin by seeking to answer the first question: What is church discipline? Church discipline refers to the process that is spelled out for us in Matthew 18:15-17 that is to be initiated by the church when they believe a brother or sister in Christ is choosing to live in sin.

So now let me read this passage for you. **“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. (16) But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. (17) If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”**

The process spelled out in these verses by Christ is the process that has come to be known, within Christian circles, as “church discipline” and it is the process that we will be examining this morning.

So now let us look at these verses a little bit more carefully. And we will begin by looking at the words, **“If your brother sins.”** These words provide the ignition point for launching the process of discipline that Christ detailed for us in **verses 15-17**. So, what does Christ mean by these words, **“If your brother sins?”**

Does this mean that any time we see a sin committed by a professing brother or sister in Christ that we immediately launch into the steps of church discipline described for us by Christ in **Matthew 18:15-17**? The answer should be obvious. This clearly is not what Christ meant.

If this were the case then everyone in this fellowship would be continuously initiating or having initiated against them the process of church discipline since every member in this fellowship, as well as in other church fellowship, is continuously sinning in various ways whether they know it or not and that includes you and that includes me.

So if this is true then when should we initiate this series of steps given to us by Christ in **Matthew 18:15-17** in light of what I have just said?

This series of steps should only be initiated when a member or members of a congregation believe that a professing brother or sister in Christ has not simply sinned at a point in time knowingly or unknowingly, which we all do, but rather when a member or members of a congregation believe that a professing brother or sister in Christ has willfully chosen to live in sin, or perhaps better said, in a way that is more consistent with the unsaved world than with the community of the redeemed.

Therefore if we as a member of this congregation see or have reason to believe that a professing brother or sister in Christ is presently choosing to live as an idolater, fornicator, adulterer, thief, liar, drunkard, drug addict, wife-beater etc., and that is in fact the lifestyle that we believe they have chosen to live and they are not striving by God’s grace to put that lifestyle away from them, even in spite of the fact that they are professing to be a Christian or a follower of Christ, then we must move forward with this

process of church discipline as it is spelled out for us in **Matthew 18:15-17**. We have no other option.

This position I believe is confirmed by the instructions of Paul to the Corinthian church in **1 Corinthians 5:9-13**, instructions that the Apostle Paul was adamant that the church follow even when dealing with very influential members of their church such as the incestuous man that is referenced in **2 Corinthians 2:5-11**.

So now with this understanding let us look at this process of church discipline and consider the various steps that Christ commanded us to take when we believe that a brother or sister in Christ has willfully chosen to live in sin. So, what is the first step?

The first step in the process of church discipline is to go to the sinning brother or sister in Christ in private (Matthew 18:15). Isn't this exactly what we see in **Matthew 18:15**? Let me read this verse for you and see if this is not so. **“If your brother sins [if your brother willfully chooses to embrace a sinful lifestyle that is more consistent with the world rather than the lifestyle the redeemed], go and show him his fault in private.”**

Is this action on our part optional? No! This is not optional. This is what we are to do. We are to go to this professing brother or sister in Christ who has chosen to walk in sin and we are to confront them in private. Now this does not mean that we cannot take counsel with a trusted brother or sister in Christ prior to going in order to make sure that our head and heart are in the right place, but even though we may take counsel with a trusted brother or sister in Christ prior to going, when we do go, if it is at all possible, we need to go alone and confront them in private for this is what Christ taught and this of course would be a very loving thing for us to do on a number of different levels.

And what would be our hope as we go to them lovingly and in private? Let us continue to read **Matthew 18:15**. **“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.”** Our hope as we lovingly go in this way as described in verse 15 is to win our brother, not to judge them, but to win them.

What a wonderful thing it is when we in obedience to Christ lovingly go to a sinning brother or sister privately in order to show them their fault and they by the grace of God listen to us, thus repenting of their of their sin and bowing before Christ as Lord. And when I talk about how wonderful it is, when this happens, I am not talking theoretically but experientially. In other words, I have seen this very thing many times and it has never gotten old.

But unfortunately this loving and private confrontation may not always turn out well. It is quite possible that rather than listening to us and being led to repent of their sins, our sinning brother or sister might grudgingly listen to us patiently waiting until we are through so that they can once again go back to their life of sin, or perhaps they might become angry with us and attack us for meddling in their lives. They could even threaten us. I have had all these things happen to me.

So, what happens if they do not listen to us and they remain unrepentant? We go to step two. So, what is step two?

The second step in the process of church discipline is to go to the sinning brother or sister with one or two others (Matthew 18:16). Let me read for you **Matthew 18:16. “But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed.”**

So, what is happening here? The circle of those seeking to restore the sinning brother or sister who has refused to repent in **verse 15** has been enlarged to include several others. These individuals are being added obviously to make it that much more difficult for the sinning brother or sister in Christ to stubbornly continue in his or her sin.

But this is not the only reason. It is also for the purpose of confirming every fact. Isn't that exactly what the verse says? It says, **“But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed.”**

Church discipline should not be conducted recklessly. It must be based in fact. In other words, church discipline cannot proceed forward unless the sin, the willfulness of the sin, and the unrepentant state of the sinner has in fact been verified as spelled out for the church in step two of the discipline

process. But if it is verified and there is no change in the sinful state of the sinning brother or sister in Christ, even after now being confronted by multiple witnesses, then the next step of church discipline must be exercised. And what is this next step, which is the third step of church discipline?

The third step of church discipline is telling it to the church (Matthew 18:17). Let me now read for you **Matthew 18:17** and see if this is not so. **“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.”** Obviously this step is pretty extreme and care certainly needs to be exercised so that when it is done we do not go beyond what Christ intended by His words or fall short of what Christ intended by His words.

So who among us would be responsible for determining how this particular step of discipline is carried out? It would be the elders who have been entrusted with the spiritual oversight of this congregation who must figure this out.

And what do the elders believe? The elders believe that the phrase, “tell it to the church,” does not necessitate that every member of the church be told of the unrepentant sinful state of a particular brother or sister in Christ, but rather only the members that personally know the person that we are seeking to restore.

In other words, if someone has been extensively involved in this fellowship and is therefore well known by this fellowship we will make their sin known to the entire fellowship as we did three weeks ago, but if it only a few people know the person that we are seeking to restore then we will only make their sin known to the few people that know them within our church that personally know them.

And why would we do this? We would do this so that those who know them might then go to them and appeal on the basis of God’s Word for them to repent. This is why would make it known to those who know them. And hopefully this is exactly what has been taking place over the past several weeks in respect to this beloved sister in Christ that we have seeking to restore.

And what happens if these efforts fail? We then go to the fourth step and final step of church discipline. So, what is that?

The fourth and final step of church discipline is to break off all social contact (Matthew 18:17). Let me read **Matthew 18:17** and see if this is not so. **“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.”**

When Christ said, **“Let them be to you as Gentile and a tax collector,”** this would have meant in the Jewish context that all those within the church who knew this unrepentant sinner and had some kind of relationship with him would in obedience to Christ’s command cut off all social inter-action with this so-called brother or sister in Christ who stubbornly was refusing to repent. This is what Christ meant when he said, **“Let them be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”**

So, what would this accomplish? Hopefully when the church, the body of Christ, cuts off all social contact with an unrepentant sinner, the sanctifying influence of the church that has served as a buffer between them and the spiritual forces of darkness will have been removed, which will allow the unrepentant sinner to suffer all the ill effects of his fleshly choices thus hopefully leading him to godly sorrow and true repentance.

This is Paul meant when he talked about turning the incestuous man in Corinth over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh in **1 Corinthians 5:5**. Paul was not primarily talking about the destruction of his physical body but rather the destruction of his sinful and fleshly orientation.

So hopefully you now know what church discipline is and its various steps. But we are not yet done. I would now like to quickly explain to you more specifically why the practice of church discipline is so very necessary.

Practicing church discipline in obedience to Christ and seeking to rescue sinning brothers and sisters is necessary in order to protect the gospel message (Romans 6:22). Now why is this? The gospel promises that those who place their faith in Christ will be freed from sin and enslaved to God. We find this in **Romans 6:22**. If we want that message to ring true then let us practice church discipline lest people conclude that the gospel of Christ is a sham and is unable to deliver on its promise. But this is not the only reason why practicing church discipline is so necessary.

Practicing church discipline in obedience to Christ and seeking to rescue sinning brothers and sisters is necessary in order to protect the spiritual welfare of our church (1 Corinthians 5:6). Now why is this? If sin is not dealt within a church fellowship its effect is destined to spread throughout the congregation. We find this in **1 Corinthians 5:6** where Paul, in speaking about the leavening effect of sin, told the Corinthians that a little leaven (or in other words a little sin) can leaven an entire loaf of bread (or in other words can effect the entire church). If we want to protect the spiritual welfare of this church then let us practice church discipline lest the leavening effect of sin spread throughout our fellowship robbing us of blessing and God of His glory. But this is not all.

Practicing church discipline in obedience to Christ and seeking to rescue sinning brothers and sisters is necessary in order to protect them from the possibility of a misplaced hope (Matthew 7:21-23). And if there is any doubt about this let me read for you the words of Christ in **Matthew 7:21-23**. **“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. (22) Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in your name cast out demons, and in your name perform many miracles?’ (23) And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’”** If we want to protect a professing brother or sister in Christ, who has foolishly chosen to live in sin, from living with a misplaced hope, then let us practice church discipline lest in the final judgment they tragically hear these words, **“I never knew you, you who practice lawlessness.”**

Church discipline has been commanded by Christ so that perhaps through the steps that He spelled out for us in **Matthew 18:15-17** our message, our church, and those that we are seeking to restore might be protected.

Therefore, when individuals among us choose to live in sin, may we by the grace of God and because of our love for Him, His word, and His people be willing to exercise church discipline when necessary.