

Church Discipline

To many people the phrase “church discipline” sounds harsh. Puritanical. It conjures up images of the scarlett letter “A”. By and large in our society church discipline is a foreign concept. “*What right does a church have to discipline someone?*” “*It sounds legalistic.*” “*Didn’t Jesus say, ‘Judge not’?*” “*Wouldn’t we be “unloving” if we did this?*”

At first, attitudes like these are understandable. These are the attitudes of many people today, including many professing evangelical Christians. But, rather than following the trends of society or the feelings of people who mean well, the Church’s first obligation is to the Bible. The Bible says that discipline is a responsibility given to the Church (Math 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:12-13). Sadly, sin is going to happen in the life of the Church. But God expects the Church to address it and He prescribes the method for doing so in His Word.

Too often, unfortunately, leaders in churches are afraid of disunity, of being labeled “*legalists*” or “*judgmental*”, or, they just lack the courage to confront sin in a Biblical way. This doesn’t mean that the Church acts like the Gestapo. But, when a Christian’s sin is dragging down the name of our Lord and the witness of His Church, then the mature and spiritual church will deal with sin in the way the Bible says to. Although this is not easy to do, it is the necessary and right thing to do. It may not *feel* loving, but, it is loving. It is the *harder* side of loving one another.

What does the Bible say about church discipline?

To do it. It is a fundamental part of life in the Body of Christ. There are many passages in Scripture that instruct us regarding what to do when a brother or sister is going astray. Please look these up in your own Bible and read them for yourself.

In 1 Corinthians 5:1-11 Paul is shocked the Corinthian church had ignored the sin being committed by one of its members. He very sternly instructs them to separate from that member. Much can be learned from this whole chapter dealing with church discipline.

In Matthew 18:15-17 Jesus personally outlines the 4 step process for how a church is supposed to confront a member who is committing sin.

In Galatians 6:1 Paul says those who are “spiritual” are to lead the process and do it carefully and gently. The goal is to “restore” the sinning member.

In 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 Paul instructs the church to avoid the sinful member and not associate with him. The purpose is to make him feel “ashamed” of his ways so he will repent (v14). I would understand this passage to correlate with step 4 of Jesus’ instructions in Matthew 18.

First Timothy 1:20 Paul names 2 men in the church whom he personally “handed over to Satan”. We would understand this to mean putting them out of the fellowship and not associating with them. Again, I would also understand this to be the 4th and final step of Matthew 18.

In 1 Timothy 5:19-20 Paul specifically says that leaders are to be publicly rebuked for their sins, which again teaches that in the later stages of the discipline process the issue becomes public to the church body.

Titus 3:9-11 describes the steps of warning someone several times before moving into separating yourself from them. This reinforces again what Jesus taught in Matthew 18 that the person is to be confronted multiple times before they are avoided altogether.

Hebrews 12:1-14 is very important for understanding church discipline. The passage describes God's activity of disciplining His children. The dual points in the passage are 1) discipline is an act of love and 2) discipline leads to righteousness. Since these are God's reasons they are the Church's reasons for carrying out discipline.

Again, Ephesians 4:15-16 directs us that the "truth" should be spoken "in love" to each other. Sometimes the truth of one another's sins need to be addressed and always in brotherly love.

Proverbs 27:6 says, "***Wounds from a friend can be trusted.***" Sometimes we need our friends to wound us for our building up.

Matthew 7:1-5. This verse does not say that we are not supposed to judge. Rather Jesus is alerting us to the wrong way of judging. He is warning us against self-righteous and hypocritical judging.

Finally, Revelation 2-3 is the description of Jesus Christ disciplining the 7 churches of Asia. He didn't hate them, He loved them and therefore rebuked them (3:19). He confronted their specific sins and warned them to repent. He graciously pointed out their issues and how to correct them.

What is church discipline?

Simply put, it is the effort made by Christians to restore another Christian to right living in Christ. Christians are supposed to live holy lives. Paul said in Ephesians 4:1, "***I urge you to live worthy of your calling.***" In 2 Timothy 1:9 it says, "***[God] has saved us and called us to a holy life...***" and in 2:19 it says, "***Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.***"

But the reality is that from time to time Christians are going to get caught in sin and need help getting out. This is where church discipline comes in. It is the Biblical process whereby Christians lead another Christian to repentance. That is the difference between punitive and corrective discipline. Punitive discipline condemns and punishes. Corrective discipline – "Church discipline" - is the attempt to correct someone's sinful behavior so that they return to a way of living that glorifies God (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Why is church discipline important?

First, church discipline is important because it maintains the church's purity. Without church discipline the purity of the church is at risk. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 5:6, "***Don't you know that a little yeast works its way through the whole batch?***" The metaphor is a good one. Sin that is not dealt with will spread throughout the church body. A church can quickly become polluted when sin is not addressed Biblically.

Second, our ability to witness with power will be preserved. Nothing robs a local church of power to witness for Jesus Christ like letting sin run rampant. Sin weakens the testimony and credibility of Christians. Only through living “*self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age*” (Titus 2:12) do we maintain a powerful witness for Jesus Christ before the world.

Thirdly, it shows love. Despite people’s objections, a church does not love if it does not follow the Bible’s instructions for disciplining wayward members. The Bible teaches a procedure that is fair to the offender and safeguards against harshness and hastiness. It also lays the most challenging of tasks on those leading the process of discipline: to love someone patiently and humbly even when they are not doing what they should be doing. It requires leaders remember that they too are weak and prone to sin. It requires carefully examining the planks in their own eyes before removing the speck of sawdust in the eyes of others (Matthew 7:3-5).

Lastly, it shows reverence for the name of our God. Our conduct represents our God and therefore we should represent a holy God (1 Pet. 1:16). Paul handed two men over to Satan (1 Tim. 1:20) because they were blaspheming – that is, they were smearing the name of God. Paul also told Titus that he wanted people to live godly lives so that “*no one will malign the word of God*” (2:5), or so that the world may “*have nothing bad to say about us*” (2:8), and “*so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive*” (2:10). At those times when another Christian’s conduct is smearing the holy name of God it is important to exercise church discipline to uphold God’s reputation.

How is church discipline carried out?

Lovingly. This kind of discipline is done from a heart of love from beginning to end. Each step along the way is governed by love, and motivated by the hope that the fellow believer will repent and ultimately be restored. We earnestly hope and pray and long to rejoice in their repentance. This only comes from true love inside us for the other person. There is no place in the discipline process for self-righteousness – the Bible does not permit that. Each of us needs to have a heart that is constantly ready to forgive and affirm our love and support for this fellow believer at the time when real repentance is made evident.

Prayerfully. If we love someone and we want God to change their heart then we will pray. If the Holy Spirit is grieved when we sin (Eph. 4:30), then we too are grieved and we will pray. When King Saul of Israel sinned, the prophet Samuel said, “*Far be it from me to sin against the Lord and not pray for you.*” Far be it from us to sin against God and not pray for our brother or sister when they sin.

Step-by-step. Matthew 18 describes the 4 step process. At each step the hope is that the person will repent. If they do not then the next step is taken. The amount of time spent on each step is not given by Jesus, and, therefore is left to the discretion of Spirit-filled, prayer-led leaders who are spiritually minded. It requires patience and discernment. It is to be done carefully and gently (Gal. 6:1), with much prayer and humble self-examination beforehand (Matt. 7:3-5). No one likes to be confronted over things in their lives. However, Christians, more than anyone else, should acknowledge the need to at least listen humbly when someone is trying to speak truth lovingly into their lives.

- 1) Go to the person in a one on one meeting. Jesus says in verse 15, “***If your brother sins against you go and show him his fault, just between the two of you.***” It is up to the individual pursuer to try and persuade his brother or sister to repent.
- 2) Go to the person again, but with 2 or 3 others. Jesus says in verse 16, “***If he will not listen, take one or two others along...***” In other words take a couple of other wisely chosen Christians along with you to confront the brother again. Pray and plead and hope that he will let you win him over.
- 3) Tell the Church. Jesus says in verse 17, “***If he refuses to listen to them [the small group from step 2] tell it to the church***”. Now the whole Church is to be informed about the situation. The whole Church is to pray and pursue the person. Two important points: 1) it is not made public except to the members of the local church, and 2) the church is informed because the church now has a responsibility to confront their fellow member. Since they wouldn't listen to the individual, and they wouldn't listen to the small group, now the hope is that they will listen to the voice of the whole Church.
- 4) Remove the person from fellowship. Jesus says in verse 17, “***...and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.***” In other words, if he won't listen to the voice of the whole church, then Jesus says to separate him from the Church. This means Christians are to avoid any communication, fellowship and especially social activities with the person - both inside and outside of church. This kind of disassociation, or avoidance, is confirmed in other Scriptures (1 Cor. 5:2, 5, 11-13; 2 Thessalonians 3:14; Titus 3:10-11).

***Success is not that the person repents, although that is the highest hope. Success for a church that is working through the discipline process means that the church faithfully and lovingly carries out everything the word of God says to do in the situation. Regardless of how the other person responds. In other words, success is doing what is in God's Word and prayerfully leaving the results in His hands.

Hope

Paul did discipline with at least 4 people (1 Cor. 5:3; Gal. 2:11,14; 1 Tim. 1:20). With at least 2 of them it resulted in their repentance. In 2 Corinthians 2:6-8 we are given a picture of what happens when a church lovingly and faithfully carries out discipline with a sinning member. The man who was disciplined in 1 Corinthians 5 has now repented and Paul tells the church to receive him back with love and forgiveness. I personally cannot imagine anything more heart-wrenching for a church than having to discipline a fellow heir in Christ. But neither can I imagine any greater joy than when a wandering sheep is rescued and brought back into the fold because of the process (Luke 15:4-7). Sometimes the harder side of love is needed to bring someone from the harder paths of sin.