

Discipline in the Church

Matthew 18:15 ESV (Pg 480) “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. **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. **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. **18** 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. **19** 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.”

- I. Last week we began a series on the Lord’s discipline. We learned that discipline is something to be embraced; that it is for our good and results in holiness. Discipline is not the same as punishment. Jesus has already taken all our punishment (leaving none for us to experience), but discipline is always evidence of God’s love.
 - A. Today we’ll talk about how discipline plays out within the church. What role do the members of the body have in disciplining the church? What offenses bring someone under the discipline of the church? What are the boundaries for church discipline? When should we escalate a discipline process?
 1. This is a big subject, so there’s no way to cover everything in one morning. So if you still have questions when we’re done, I will be available to answer your questions after service, or fill out a white card and I’ll call you later.
 2. For a more complete examination, let me also suggest you read the little book, Church Discipline by Jonathan Leeman¹. It thoroughly explains church government concepts that I will only briefly fly over today.
 - B. Although there are many passages in the New Testament that deal with church discipline, Matthew 18 most clearly defines what Christ expects. But let me give you some additional guidelines for the exercise of discipline in the church.
 1. First, from the initial to the final steps, it should only be done in love. Jesus starts by saying “**If your brother sins against you**”, so the first we consider before confronting one another is the nature of our relationships. We are not “policing” the church, we are promoting and reinforcing family unity.
 2. Second, discipline must never originate from superiority, but rather humility.
 - a) We don’t confront anyone because we are the pope, priest, pastor, elder, deacon, Life Group leader, discipler, or teacher, but rather because we are a fellow sinner who desires spiritual flourishing for every person.
 - b) **Galatians 6:1 ESV** Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him **in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.** If you’re going to dish it out, you better be willing to accept it for your own faults.
 3. Lastly, all correction should be done in community. I don’t just mean that others should be involved in the later stages (we’ll talk about that later).
 - a) It is the health of the body and the integrity of its message that is to motivate us to lovingly correct and receive correction.

- b) We never correct just because our feelings are hurt, or because things weren't handled according to our preferences, but we correct in order to protect the unity of the saints, and adorn the gospel we proclaim. With that in mind let's examine what Jesus has taught on church discipline...
- II. "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." Jesus asserts that where people are living in community, offense will invariably occur. When people join NRLC, I tell them they will have many opportunities to forgive one or more of us; but I also assure them that we are looking forward to forgiving them as well.
- A. As I said, Jesus begins with friction between **brothers**, not sworn enemies, and He places an obligation on the one offended to approach the other party when things go wrong. "They know what they did" is never sufficient for believers.
- B. Notice that he does not say to go and tell all your friends about the other's fault, but rather, "**between you and him alone**". Jesus wants the circle of communication be kept as small as possible, for as long as possible. If you come to me with a grievance against another member, the first thing I will ask is, "have you spoken directly to them about it?" That is where this all starts.
1. Also notice that it doesn't say "send your pastor to them"; it clearly says that **you** go to him. You are responsible to attempt the restoration of peace.
 2. So every believer bears responsibility for working for order in the the Body of Christ, not just the leaders. All of us must "seek peace and pursue it".²
- C. After you speak to them, If they humbly respond either in repentance or explanation, Jesus says you've "gained your brother". Again, the restoration of unity, not punishment or revenge, is the goal of all of our loving correction.
- III. "**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.**" Jesus understands that relationships are hard, and sometimes repentance doesn't happen immediately. If there is no repentance, Jesus says to take one or two others. The goal is still to keep the circle as small as possible for as long as possible. This is not to "gang up" on them, making them submit. The role of the others is two-fold:
- A. First, if the offense is well-known, they can join you to lovingly plead for repentance. They may have a grace or favor with the other person you don't have, being able to touch their heart and persuade them more effectively.
- B. Second, if the offender doesn't understand or acknowledge the offense, the others can help you by hearing the story from both sides, bringing wisdom.
1. Sometimes being in community requires us to admit we don't always see things clearly, and what we perceive as an offense isn't one at all; it may simply be a misunderstanding, a violation of our preferences, or even a wounding of our pride and egos that has made us feel offended.
 2. This clarification is what is meant with the reference to letting "every charge...be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses"³.
- IV. "**If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.**" After the evidence has been established, and both a private and small group appeal has been unsuccessfully made for repentance, the circle widens to communication with the larger body.

- A. However, “tell it to the church” does not mean that you are now cleared to gossip about a brother or sister; but rather that the elders of the church should be informed, as those who have spiritual oversight of the local body.
 - 1. This gives the leadership the opportunity to join their voices to your appeal to the offender to repent, adding the weight of their God-given authority, and teaching clearly what the scriptures say about each particular case.
 - 2. In some cases, depending on several factors (such as the severity of sin and unwillingness to repent), the elders may make a decision to inform an even larger group in the church, for the protection and purity of those in the body.
- B. But even at this late stage, there is constant prayer and hope for the restoration of the errant brother or sister, that God would compel their hearts. But Christ goes on to say, “And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” This speaks of the final, most severe, and misunderstood phase of church discipline: excommunication.
 - 1. Most of us think of being kicked out of the church or shunned when we hear “excommunication”. Though there are times when someone must be prohibited from our services, (a practicing child molester or wife beater), Let’s try to better understand what is meant by excommunication.
 - 2. Jesus defines excommunication as considering someone to be equal to a “Gentile and a tax collector”. What does he mean by that?
 - a) To Jesus’ first century audience, a “Gentile” is a non-Jewish person, outside the covenant community. A tax collector, would be someone who once was a part, but has now betrayed the community in order to do the enemy’s dirty work⁴. They are essentially a traitor.
 - b) Jesus is saying to regard people who refuse to repent, though they were once part of our church community as those who are outside the body, or as those who betrayed their allegiance to all we proclaim and represent.
- C. Therefore, excommunication is not just kicking someone out of the church; it is a clear affirmation by the church that, based on the evidence we have, we cannot affirm the genuineness of a person’s profession of faith in Christ.
 - 1. We make this clear mostly by withholding communion, which is a believer’s continued proclamation that we’ve been redeemed and are now associated with Christ’s body around the world throughout time.
 - 2. We have no authority to say that someone is or isn’t saved; only God can do that. But we have been given authority to say that we do not see any compelling evidence that they belong to the people of God.
- D. The church affirms people who seem to be true believers by sharing communion, and none of us should want to give someone false assurance.
- V. “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. 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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”
 - A. Many of us have thought these scriptures pertained to our prayers; thinking we are to bind curses and loose blessings; to agree with other believers about various prayer concerns, believing God will respond; assured that if two or three of us gather for prayer, coffee, or anything else Jesus is right there with us.

- B. I have no quarrel with any of that, but the problem is that none of that is anywhere in the context of this passage. Jesus is speaking about the discipline of his church, and telling his followers how to oversee and proceed in the process. Based on the context, I think those verses mean something different:
1. I think Jesus is telling us that whatever judgements we as a church prayerfully make binding on earth are confirmed in heaven with God's authority. Whatever judgements we loose on earth are removed in Heaven.
 - a) But remember, the thinking here is **communal**. This doesn't mean that any one individual can put any other individual under church discipline, or release them from the judgement of the body without its agreement.
 - b) But the authority for all this has clearly been granted to the church by Christ. **John 20:23 ESV** "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."
 2. Jesus knows that this is a tough task for any church to undertake, so he promises us his confirming presence when we are obedient in doing it: "**For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.**"
- VI. But what offenses should bring someone under the discipline of the church? Do we initiate church discipline for every lustful thought, unkind word, and greedy heart? We know we should never tolerate sin, in any form, in ourselves or others. But we should be most concerned with our own struggles, and less with others sins. **Matthew 7:4 ESV** Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? **5** You 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.
- A. We are all fallen, so if every offense resulted in excommunication, not one of us would survive even one more Sunday! All of us have pesky recurring sins, and while we should speak into each others lives, challenging each other on even the smaller offenses, the later stages of church discipline are more likely reserved for a different class of sins than the common, daily failures we all face.
1. First, sins that negatively affect the health, unity, or peace of the body, or the reputation of Jesus Christ. For example, if your family is suffering under your abusiveness or addictions, or if you are gossiping about or slandering another member of the body of Christ, or if you have an unbiblical sexual ethic, you will be called to repentance. There are many other scenarios.
 2. Next, the public knowledge of the sin must be considered. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul confronts the church about a man who is sleeping with his stepmom, everybody in the church knew, and acting like it was no big deal. **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. **2** And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? **Let him who has done this be removed from among you.**
 - a) Notice here that Paul **started** with excommunication, skipping the previous steps Jesus mentioned! Why would he do that?
 - b) Because of the public shame brought on the name of Christ by the sin (a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans), and also the fact that

there was no need for an investigation; every single person in the church apparently knew and was boasting, and the sinner wasn't repenting!

3. Also, we consider the level of leadership in discipline situations. James said those who teach would be held to a more strict judgement⁵. A leader who falls has great potential to bring shame to the Name and cause of Christ. Therefore, where a new convert might illicit greater understanding, verified abuses by leaders in the church should bring swift correction.
 - a) "Verified" because: **1 Timothy 5:19 CSB Don't accept an accusation against an elder unless it is supported by two or three witnesses.**
 - b) Leaders should be above reproach in questions of morality and integrity of all sorts; financial, sexual, relational, and theological to name just a few. If they fail to be, the church should have mechanisms in place to address and correct the reproach, and remove the leader if necessary.
- VII. Like the direct discipline of the Lord that we spoke of last week, a church with a strong commitment to loving, consistent discipline is a good thing. It results in a clean conscience within the church, and a good testimony outside of it. Discipline is a sign of health that should never disintegrate into bullying, control, and elitism.
- A. Most problems will be resolved in phase one. "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." This is a glorious, reinforcing thing in the Body.
 - B. Some problems may have to escalate to phase 2. "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." This also is a good thing as people stand together for the sake of gospel truth, elevating the Word above all else.
 - C. Sadly some things may rise to phase 3. "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church." Though it is painful, it can still be unifying as the church comes together to pray and cry for the wandering sheep who has left Jesus' fold.
 - D. A minute percentage of people we love may have to put into phase 4. "if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Though rare, when this happens, may we always pray for a corrective grace that sees people for whom Christ died quickly repent and be restored!
- VIII. Let's come to the Lord's table with hearts full of gratitude for the sacrifice of the Lord on the cross, his glorious resurrection, and his triumphant ascension.
- A. Let's thank him for the fact that through his redemptive work, which we reflect on and celebrate in the bread and in the cup, we who were far apart from each other have been made into one body: red and yellow, black and white.
 - B. **Ephesians 2:14 ESV** For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility **15** by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, **16** and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. **17** And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. **18** For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. **19** So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, **20** built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself

being the cornerstone, **21** in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. **22** In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

- C. One of the great joys of being one body together is the encouragement that we give each other to keep running our race.
 - 1. The writer of Hebrews said that we should “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”⁶
 - 2. At the heart of it, that’s what mutual church discipline is all about. Stirring each other up for the purpose of love, not because of hostility and division; for the purpose of good works done in worship, not the dead works of sin and depravity; meeting together in generous community, not living separate, selfish lives; encouraging each other, not slandering and tearing each other down; and doing all of this with an increasing intensity as we see the day of our redemption approaching.
- D. Let’s remember that because of Jesus, we are in this thing together, eternally, as we come celebrating to his table.
- E. **1 Corinthians 11:23 ESV** For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” **25** In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” **26** For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

¹ Leeman, Jonathan; *Church Discipline*, Wheaton IL, Crossway © 2012

² Psalm 34:14 (cf. 1 Peter 3:11)

³ Jesus is citing Deuteronomy 19:15 here.

⁴ Leeman, Jonathan; *Church Discipline*, Wheaton IL, Crossway © 2012; Pg 29

⁵ James 3:1

⁶ Hebrews 10:24-25