

Recovering Church Discipline Part 2 -
The Process of Church Discipline

By
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One thing I have observed recently about the daily processes of life is that corrective measures often come with a certain measure of pain. I experienced this in a physical way during this last holiday season.

While in Washington over the Christmas holiday, at the urging of my wife's family, I went to a chiropractor for an adjustment. The impetus behind their urging was a series of headaches that would launch me out of bed in the middle of the night and send me feverishly searching for Tylenol. I don't typically have recurring headaches, so my family thought it might have something to do with my neck or back being out of alignment - perhaps as a result of the pillow I was using. So I went.

When I finally saw the chiropractor he had me lay on the table and did a series of tests to determine if and where my spine was out of alignment. Having finished his tests he looked at me and said, "yep, you're out." "Your lower back and upper neck are out of alignment." In an effort to correct it he positioned me on the table in a particular way and with a little pressure cracked my lower back. "Not bad," I thought. "That didn't hurt." But then he moved to my neck. He jiggled my head back and forth a few times and asked me to relax, and then maneuvered my neck rather quickly to get certain vertebrae to straighten. Now, I'm sure that what he did was very gentle, but from my angle it felt like he was trying to tie a knot in my neck. And in the end, whatever he was trying to do didn't work. There was no crack and no pop. Only this time, it did hurt. At that, he said, "that one is tight, we're going to have to try again." And so he did, and so I feared. This time, when he maneuvered my neck it did finally pop. And yes, it did hurt. The effect however was amazing. It immediately alleviated, to a great degree, my problem with headaches. Yet, I had to go through a certain amount of pain to experience the healing.

This seems to be a proverbial truth of life. In order to experience healing, we often must endure a certain amount of pain. Or to put it another way, to experience the correction of a problem – whether that be headaches, toothaches, broken arms, cancer, or disease – we often must endure pain or hurt associated with the corrective process toward healing. Too, there is almost always another person – a doctor, a chiropractor, or a dentist – who is instrumental in the painful process of correcting the problem.

According to the Scripture the same is true of the Christian life. Often times, we as believers stumble into areas of disobedience and sin that reaps for us a crop pain and misery. The miserable consequences can range from broken fellowship with God and others to the disintegration of marriages and family relationships. That is to say, the symptoms associated with undealt with sin can be miserable, painful and destructive.

The corrective process toward spiritual healing and removal of a particular sin in the Christian life, much like my visit to the chiropractor, is also often painful. Yet the pain brought on by the corrective process to extract the Christian brother or sister from the sticky mire of their particular sin, is pain that leads to healing and freedom. In addition to this, God oftentimes utilizes others in the body of Christ to administer the corrective treatment – as God often utilizes medical doctors to administer corrective treatment to our physical bodies.

This corrective process that seeks to bring restoration and healing to a brother or sister who has fallen prey to a particular sin is what we have referred to in the weeks prior as "church discipline". In the previous session, we looked at the *motivation* and *purposes* of church discipline. There, we saw that the motivation for corrective discipline within the context of the church is *love*. True discipline, according to the Scriptures, is motivated by true Christian love for the fallen brother or sister. Conversely, we saw that love without discipline is no love at all, for love and discipline hang inextricably together. We also observed three purposes of church discipline: 1. to restore the fallen believer; 2. to protect the purity of

the church family; and 3. to protect the honor of Christ. We also noted that the practice of church discipline upon members of its fellowship has been largely neglected by the American church and at great cost. Its recovery is vital to the health and witness of the church of Christ.

In this study, I would like us to look at the *process* of church discipline. In considering the biblical process for church discipline we are answering the question, *what are we to do, or what is the process for dealing with a brother or sister in our congregation who is involved in an immorality of some sort?* In Matthew 18:15-17 Jesus outlines a three-step process for us to follow in dealing with a fallen family member. In what follows I would like us to examine each step to the end that we might be equipped and prepared to practice this in our church family.

Before we examine the meaning and application of what Jesus says in verses 15-17, however, it would be helpful to note the immediate context of Jesus teaching. In the earlier portion of chapter 18 we see two prominent themes - the seriousness of sin; and God's heart of mercy for straying sheep.

In verses 8-9, for example Jesus teaches us, how we are to radically deal with sin in our lives saying it in rather graphic language:

⁸If your hand or your foot causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. ⁹ And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

This teaching helps us understand why, when we see a brother caught in a particular sin, we must act. For sin and toleration of sin is a serious matter. Further, it is precisely the seriousness of sin that prompts God to search after his straying sheep, which is the second prominent theme of the context. We observe in verses 12-14 God's heart of compassion for his straying sheep. Jesus teaches us about God's heart through a parable saying:

¹² What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? ¹³ And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. ¹⁴ In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

Here, the "little ones" refer to believers who have entered into the kingdom through child-like faith. The Father is passionate about keeping his people in the fold. When one wanders off, this signifying wandering into sin, he pursues him or her. Surely, if this is God's heart for the wayward believer who has wandered off into some kind of sin, then certainly it should be our heart for the people of God's fold as well. We are called to exercise the same kind of mercy and compassion that God demonstrates toward his people.

It is on the basis of these two themes - the seriousness of sin along with the great compassion of God for his wandering sheep - that Jesus instructs us on how to deal with a believer who is straying. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that God uses his people to minister to his own. Or put differently, he pursues the lost sheep through the faithful obedience of others in the fold.

With this in mind, we turn to Jesus' teaching on how to deal with a sinning brother or sister. He gives us this first step in the discipline process in verse 15 saying,

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.

Step 1 – Confront the sinning believer individually and privately

The first step in the process of dealing with a believer¹ who has fallen into a particular sin is to go and show him his sin individually and privately.

If you're reading the text closely, you might object and say, "This verse deals with a brother who sins 'against you,' not sin in general - it deals with a personal offense." If you're reading the New American Standard translation (NAS), however, you'll notice that the phrase "against you" is entirely missing. It translates verse 15 "And if your brother sins, go and reprove . . ." The reason for this is that some of the oldest manuscripts of this text, which date to the third century, don't include "against you".² This has led some Bible scholars – such as the translators of the NAS – to leave it out. Other scholars, however, are unconvinced and include it a possible reading - such as the translators of the NIV. To put you at ease, however, it should be said that it makes little difference in doctrine or application because both are taught elsewhere in Scripture.

We read, for example, in a parallel passage in Luke that, "If your brother sins, rebuke him . . ." (Luke 17:3). Here the application is general to any brother who sins not just the one who sins "against you". Galatians 6:1, as well, makes the general application that "if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently."

Clearly, in light of other biblical passages we have been given a responsibility to act when we see a member of our Christian family in sin. What are we to do? What should we do when we know of a brother who is abusing his wife and children? What should we do when we know of a sister who is sleeping with her boyfriend? According to Jesus, we must "go and show him [or her] his fault, just between the two of you"

Here Jesus points out *what we are to do* and *how we are to do it*. First, we are to show the brother his fault. That is, we are to confront his sin and expose it to him. He must be called to the carpet to face the truth about his actions. Just as an alcoholic must face the truth that he is an alcoholic before he can pursue recovery, so the sinning brother must face his sin before he can be restored.

This is important, because of the deceitfulness of sin. It blinds us to the truth that it is sin. We can easily deceive ourselves through rationalization, justification or the callusing effect of repeated involvement to the point that we don't think we're sinning.

For example, we may become so used to speaking in half-truths in the work place to sell a particular product, that we become calloused and deceived about the fact that we have become liars. The boyfriend can justify having sex outside of marriage because he is in love. Over time the heart becomes calloused and deceived to the point that he no longer sees his lifestyle as an affront to God and a denial of the cross.

It is precisely because of the deceptiveness of sin that we must go to the brother or sister and show them their sin. We must go to them, hold up the mirror of God's truth, which is His Word, so that the

¹ It should be clarified once again that church discipline is something applied to professed believers only: that is, it is for Christians not unbelievers who may be attending the assembly.

² The earliest manuscripts that omit the phrase "against you", according to the UBS 3rd Ed. date to the third and fourth centuries. However, as Metzger notes, "It is possible that the words εἰς σε.δ are an early interpolation into the original text, perhaps derived by copyists from the use of εἰς ἐμε in ver. 21. On the other hand, it is also possible to regard their omission as either deliberate (in order to render the passage applicable to sin in general) or accidental (for in later Greek the pronunciation of h, h, and ei was similar)." For this reason the committee included this reading and gave it a "C" rating indicating a "considerable degree of doubt". (Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Second ed. p. 36.

sinning person can see sin as God sees it – as something horrid and dangerous to the soul (see 18:8-9). For this reason, I believe it is imperative that we use the Scripture in showing a person their sin. Show them the texts that deal with their particular sin. Ultimately it will not be your word that reveals their sin, but the light of God’s Word. Thus, in the event that you are directed by God to exercise this first step of corrective discipline and show a person his or her sin, use the Scripture.

You’ll also notice that Jesus tells us how we are to confront the sinning brother. He tells us in no uncertain terms that we are to confront them. He says, “go and show him his fault, just between the two of you”. The confrontation is to be done in private and just between the two of you. This is of the utmost importance because of the human itch to gossip. The application of this is clear. If you see a fellow believer living in sin, it is your responsibility to go directly to them, not to the pastor or elder or friend. The potential for gossip is too great. On the flip side, if Christian comes to you and tells you about another person who is committing some sin, direct him or her back to the fallen brother or sister. In this way, we protect the church from the cancer of gossip as well as the sinning brother from unnecessary exposure or embarrassment.

Finally, we observe in this verse the purpose of the confrontation and the process of discipline itself. The intent is to win the brother. For if the brother is brought face to face with his sin and repents, than we have been used by God to restore the fallen Christian. This aim, as expressed in the previous study, must be kept in mind. Our purpose in confrontation must never be to personally condemn, nor crush nor establish superiority. This kind of judgmental or condemning attitude of arrogance is sin itself (see Matt. 7:1-4). Rather, we must endeavor in humility and gentleness, aware of our own sinfulness, to win him, not beat him over the head, leaving him crushed and bleeding.

This is the first step of church discipline. It is a great responsibility of every member and integral to the health of the church family. It is one that the entire church family must embrace if we assist one another in following Christ. Further, it is a step that requires great courage. For as much as it hurts to be confronted about a weakness or sin, it is perhaps even harder to be the one who causes the hurt. Yet the fact that it hurts to confront another is itself a sign that we are doing it out of love. If confrontation is easy, then we should question whether we are doing it out of sincere love.

In most cases this first step ends in restoration and needs to go no further. For deep down the true Christian wants to follow Christ and overcome the particular sin. You are simply directing him back to the path he or she wants to be on. It should be said as well, by way of encouragement, that I have found that most believers are very appreciative when you love them enough (if done in the right spirit) to speak truthfully to them. I know personally that when I have been confronted in the past I have been grateful to God for the love and courage of the confronter. Further, the confrontations are often times catalysts for further transformation of character.

However, not all confrontations of sin will end in restoration or winning the sinning believer. Some may get angry. Others may get defensive and hurl misused portions of Scripture at you like "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" or “do not judge, or you too will be judged” to get you off their back. And, in short, they refuse to leave their sin. In this case, the discipline process intensifies and moves to step two.

Jesus gives us step two in verse 16 saying:

¹⁶ But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'

Step 2 – Confront the sinning believer with a small group of two or three.

If the sinning brother will not respond to the confrontation of one, perhaps the cumulative voice of two or three will persuade the wayward brother. After all, if only one person tells me that have a sin problem I may be able to dismiss him as ignorant or extreme. However, if multiple voices are telling me that I have a sin problem then I may sit up and consider carefully what they say and turn from my wrongdoing.

The purpose of these witnesses in the context is not to witness the sin itself, but to witness the confrontation and assist in persuading him or her to turn from his sin. This is seen at the beginning of verse 17 where it says, “if he refuses to listen to them” indicating the additional witnesses are endeavoring to persuade him of his sin and to win him back. Again, the purpose of this second step is not to embarrass but to win the brother. They are attempting to draw him back to the narrow path of following Christ.

An important question that still has yet to be answered is what kind of sin should be the focus of church discipline? For, it is a theological and experiential fact that every Christian continues to struggle at some level with sin. (For this reason alone, the discipline process should be done in the spirit of absolute humility for we are all recipients of salvation by grace alone.) What should be our guide in determining the application of this discipline process? Here let me suggest three guiding principles. First, *sins that require church discipline must be clearly be sin* (as opposed to a disputable matters or “gray areas” such as what you drink, eat, watch on TV etc. referred to by Paul in Rom. 14). Second, in nearly every instance of church discipline throughout the New Testament *the sins were outwardly evident or observable*. They include sins such as: causing dissension (Rom.16:17); incest (1 Cor. 5); refusing to work (2 Thess. 3:6-10); idolatry (1 Cor. 5:11); verbal abuse (1 Cor. 5:11); and drunkenness (1 Cor. 5:11). All are outwardly evident or observable sins. Third, in each *case the sinful action was ongoing* causing harm to the fellowship of the church. Because of this it affected the community. These principles should be kept in mind when discerning the need for church discipline. If it is clearly an observable and ongoing sin then the discipline process should be applied.

The next question that arises in step two is who should the two witnesses be? Say for example, you have gone through step one with someone in our church family about a clearly observable sin and they have refused to listen to you. Who should you take with you? In light of the possibility that the discipline process might go to the next step and be brought before the church body, I would recommend one of the witnesses being a leader in the church – a pastor, an elder or small group leader. Other than this, the person who accompanies you should be spiritually mature³ - preferably someone who knows the individual under discipline.

If, after the small group confrontation, the sinning brother repents of his sinful course, then the brother has been won back and the discipline process need go no further. However, it may be that even when confronted by two or three the brother in hardness of heart will refuse to listen. This brings us to the third and final step of church discipline.

Jesus goes on to this third step in verse 17 saying:

¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Step 3 – Confront the sinning believer as a church body.

³ Galatians 6:1 is insightful here in that it appoints those who are “spiritual” to restore the sinning brother. They must be people who are spiritually mature and submitted to the spirit of God. Having a mature brother or sister who brings spiritual wisdom and insight to the meeting will be invaluable.

This final step of church discipline is without question the one we have the hardest time accepting psychologically. Having been washed in the values of our contemporary culture that are often contrary to the values of Scripture, this notion of dealing publicly with a brother who refuses to repent seems almost primeval if not outright harsh or oppressive. The very idea may cause you to tense up or cause a knee jerk reaction.

In response to this we must keep in mind a couple of things. First, we must recognize that this is a teaching of Jesus and that it is an unambiguous one. Second, we must keep in mind the two themes introduced in the earlier part of chapter 18 – the seriousness of sin as well as the tremendous great compassion that God exercises in pursuing his lost sheep. God is more concerned with our spiritual health than he is our comfort or our reputation. If exposure of one’s sin to the entire church will bring a person back, then in light of eternity, it is worth it. We, however, don’t tend to see things from the divine perspective and as a result see this action as cruel.

However, this is clearly what Jesus instructs us to do. If the brother does not repent from his sin during the previous steps, then we must make it known to the church body. Even here, however, it should be kept in mind that the intent is not to embarrass but to restore. The sin is revealed to the church so that the church can confront him. We observe this in the middle of verse 17 where Jesus say that “if he refuses to listen even to the church....” signifying that the sin was made known to the church so the body could work to persuade the wayward brother to turn from his destructive way. The heartbeat, and desire of the church for this brother, must be one that seeks restoration and healing. It should be mentioned as well that if it ever gets to this point, the church family should be on its knees praying fervently, interceding on behalf of the sinning brother, mourning over the state of his hard heart, and urging him with every ounce of persuasive speech to repent.

If, however, in the end the sinning member of the church family does not listen to the individual, the small group or even the church body then Jesus instructs us to “treat him as you would a pagan or tax collector.” This is the final and last resort of the church when a believer refuses to leave his sin.

What Jesus has in mind, here, is what people have termed excommunication or dis-fellowshipping. In Jesus’ day observant Jews kept their distance from immoral people such as tax collectors and pagans. They remained aloof from them. The tax collector and pagan were not allowed to be a part of the Jewish fellowship. So, when Jesus says we must treat the sin-hardened brother as a tax collector and pagan, he is saying that we must keep our distance from him.⁴ He must not be allowed to experience the joy and strength of Christian fellowship while indulging in his sinful delight. He must be made to feel the loss of his family and isolation from the spiritual community. He has spiritually been placed outside.

Paul’s instructions to the Corinthians on this final step are insightful. He writes in verse 9:

⁹ I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people-- ¹⁰ not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. ¹¹ But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. ¹² What business is it of

⁴ Some may object at this point and say, “didn’t Jesus associate with tax collectors and sinners in order to reach them?” The answer, of course, is yes. There is a difference, however, between the lost person who is living a godless life and the confessed believer who in hardness of heart indulges in an ungodly activity. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 5, discusses with some detail the difference between how we relate to the immoral person who is outside the church, and the way we should relate to the one who is a part of it. With the latter, we are clearly instructed not to associate.

mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? ¹³ God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you."

Here Paul contrasts the way in which we are to relate to the immoral people outside the church to the way we are to treat an immoral person who calls himself a brother. To the people enslaved in their sin outside the Christian community we are to be witnesses and ministers requiring a certain level of association (as Jesus associated with tax collectors and sinners). Yet to the immoral brother who has refused to repent, we must "not associate" with him . . ." and "with such a man" not even to eat. At the very least, excommunication means that he should not be allowed to participate in corporate worship, share in communion, join in group Bible study, break bread or any other activity which unites believers together. This does not mean, however, that we cannot pray for him or speak to him, for Paul tells us elsewhere to "admonish him as a brother" (2 Thess. 3:15). If we do interact with an excommunicated brother or sister it must be with the aim of calling him to face and repent of his sin. In short, he must be placed outside the confines of Christian fellowship.

From one angle, excommunication gives the sinning brother what he truly desires, the things of the world without giving him the added blessing of spiritual fellowship.

Even in this final step, however, we must remember that excommunication is for the ultimate purpose of restoration. It is patterned upon the way God has worked historically with his people. We observe in the Old Testament, for example, when Israel failed to respond to God's various forms of discipline (e.g. droughts, invasion, pestilence etc.) they were ultimately removed from the land and the presence of God signified by the temple (a type of excommunication). That is, God gave them over to their enemies for the ultimate purpose that they would cry out to him repent and return to him. This is the idea behind Paul's association of excommunication with delivering a person over to Satan (1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20). Just as God delivered his people over to their enemies to bring them to repentance, so Paul delivered certain individuals over to our archenemy in hopes that they would ultimately repent and return. Thus, excommunication should ultimately be a work of compassion. As Jonathan Edwards rightly asserts in his sermon on excommunication, "Excommunication itself is to be performed as an act of benevolence. We should seek their good by it; and it is to be used as a means of their eternal salvation."⁵

As contrary as this may seem, it is nonetheless proven true by divine example and by the witness of Scripture. We must be willing to trust that in the wisdom of God's Word and the work of God's Spirit. Too, as we'll see next week, the power of church discipline ultimately stems not from people but from God himself, for it he is behind it.

If we are as a community of believers to take the Christian life seriously, our sin seriously, our responsibility to love one another seriously, and God's Word seriously, then we must be a disciplining church. If you're thinking to yourself, "this is pretty radical" you're right. A church that is committed to biblical discipline is a church that is committed to radical Christianity and radical Christian community. It is a community of believers committed to the way of healing. It is a community that loves enough to do the hard thing so that in the end the eternal family of Christ might enter through the narrow gate.

These are the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, brothers and sisters. Let us humbly and carefully embrace it and practice it by faith in his Word and his power.

Soli Deo Gloria

⁵ Jonathan Edwards, Sermon V. *The Nature and End of Excommunication*, The Works of Jonathan Edwards Vol. 2. p. 117