

**Core Seminar**

**Living as a Church**

**Class 9: Church Discipline**

*Preserving God-Glorifying Unity*

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**I. Introduction**

A central theme running through this class is the tension between God’s grand purpose for the church—that we should be the manifestation of His glory on earth—and our sin. Much of what we’ve discussed has been how sin-prone Christians can glorify God through their love and unity together. But there are times when sin attacks our church and those who fall under it don’t repent. Those are tenuous times for church unity.

We could choose to ignore sin—and threaten the distinctive calling of Christ’s church. On the other, we might act harshly in self-righteousness—destroying our unity. Fortunately, the Bible has shed wisdom on this issue where ours is lacking. We refer to the Bible’s approach as church discipline—a biblical response to unrepentant sin. And far from the perceptions of witch trials and scarlet letters, discipline is an inherently positive thing—it’s commanded in Scripture as *for our good*. It means we care for each other by speaking the truth in love about our sin. It means we protect the church from serious unrepentant sin which brings disrepute to Christ. Tragically, the world can so often sneer at the church’s conduct. “He’s a leader in the church, but he’s worse than us!” Well, discipline is God’s normal tool for preserving the reputation of Christ in his church by making it clear that Christ does not condone such sin.

The model for discipline in the church is the discipline that our loving heavenly Father exercises as He deals with us. The book of Hebrews tells us: “For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Heb. 12:6). The goal of discipline is righteousness. " For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. " (Heb. 12:11).

This morning, we’ll consider how the Bible instructs us to practice church discipline and doing this well strengthens unity in the church and protects Christ’s reputation. We’ll also think about how we, as members, bear a responsibility to be involved in the discipline process.

Before we get any further, though, we need some definitional clarity.

**II. Two Kinds of Discipline**

There’s actually two kinds of discipline: formative discipline and corrective discipline. When we say “church discipline” we generally think about the second. But the first is much more common.

So first, **“*Formative discipline*.”** Leading people to maturity in Christ through positive instruction and teaching. For example, when the word is preached to us and we’re convicted, or when Christians encourage each other, that’s formative discipline. Eph. 4:11-12; Heb. 10:24-25; Col. 3:16. Formative discipline is important because God uses it to prevent the sin that would require corrective discipline.

**“*Corrective discipline,*”** on the other hand, is correcting sin in a believer’s life. Everything from privately confronting each other to formal excommunication. It’s where we have to say, “Hey, Tom, I think you were wrong to say that.” Or even finally, according to Jesus' teaching, “Mary, I know that you’re claiming to be a Christian, but we've got to treat you like a non-Christian, because you won't stop lying.” That’s all corrective discipline.

**III. The Purpose of Corrective Discipline**

This morning, we’re going to concentrate on the second of these kinds of discipline, corrective discipline. So, heading III, why do we do it? Well, mainly because the Bible tells us to do it. But it also gives us some specific goals in doing so.

**First**, the good of the person disciplined. Discipline is loving because it warns us and corrects our sin, and we profit from that. And for that person who’s living in unrepentant sin it clarifies that his actions don’t support a profession of faith in Christ.

**Second**, the good of other Christians as they see the serious nature of sin and its consequences.

**Third**, for the health of the church as a whole. It stops sin that could lead to strife and conflict—or confusion for less mature Christians about what it means to follow Jesus.

 **Fourth**, the corporate witness of the church**.** Church discipline protects our corporate witness to a watching world. People notice when there is a whole community of believers whose lives are different from the world. They can easily discount our message when our behavior looks just the same as the world around us.

And all four of those add up to the main goal of church discipline: to make known the excellence of our Redeemer.

**IV. How do we Exercise Church Discipline?**

We’ll spend the rest of our time talking about how we can exercise church discipline for our good and God’s glory. To do that, we’ll just walk through the questions you see in your handout.

***IV. A. What If someone sins against you?***

So first, what do you do if a believer sins against you? How should you react? Do you give them a piece of your mind, and then give them the silent treatment? Do you say nothing and build resentment in your heart? Well, let’s see what Jesus says.

Turn to Matthew 18:15-17.

**15**“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.

***Step #1: Go to the offender***

So, we should first go and talk with the one who sinned against us (I’ll call that person *the offender*). If he won’t listen, we’re to take a few others along. If he still refuses to listen, we should tell it to the church, which should expel him if he refuses to repent.

Well, considering this in more detail, let’s think about the first step. In most cases, that first conversation will resolve things. Either he’ll repent or you’ll realize you were mistaken. How can we prepare for a conversation like that?

**First**, pray for that person. Pray that God would be grow them spiritually; that they would desire to know more of God. This will soften your heart towards them in preparation for your talk.

**Second**, make sure that you have good cause to go to the offender. Some sins are objective. “He hit me!” Others aren’t so much. “He’s being really proud!” We can talk to another believer about either category. But the less objective a sin is, the more we need to be ready to explain our concern, but then drop the matter if they don’t agree. Don’t go saying, “you’re proud! Repent or I’ll tell it to the church.” Rather, “sister, based on the words you’re choosing, I really fear you are speaking out of pride. Do you think that might be true?”

**Third**, examine your own heart to make sure your motives are proper; make sure that you are not going to the offender out of anger, revenge, an attitude of superiority, or some other sinful attitude. (Rom. 12:19). Make sure your desire is reconciliation of the relationship for the good of both the offender and yourself, and for God’s glory. As Jesus says, confess your own sin first. And then you’ll be able to see more clearly into your brother’s sin (Matt 7:5).

**Fourth**, be very careful talking to others about this person’s sin. You see here that Jesus says go talk to *them*. Not your best friend, not the offender’s wife. Talk to *them.* It’s fine to seek counsel on how to have that conversation if you need to. But be very careful that that conversation doesn’t become gossip. And remember that even when you need counsel from another person, you can almost always get advice from them without mentioning the name of the offender.

**Finally**, when you do talk to the offender, remember to act and speak in a spirit of gentleness, humility and love. A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

All of these things will make the step of approaching the offender more effective, and preserve and protect the church’s unity by avoiding obstacles such as pride or gossip.

Now, before we move on to the next step in Matthew 18, let me make two further points about this first step in Matthew.

**First**, you may be wondering, do I go to my brother for every little offense? Most certainly not. Love covers a multitude of sins. Proverbs tells us that to overlook an offense is a glorious thing and demonstrates patience and forbearance. (Proverbs 19:11). So, when should you go? Two questions to ask yourself.

One, has the offense led to a broken relationship between you? Does it come to mind frequently? Does it make you feel different toward that person for more than a passing moment? Is it difficult for you to forgive? If the answer is yes to any one of these, then you should probably go and talk to the offender.

Two, what’s the danger of this sin to the offender? Keep in mind what James writes: “whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins” (5:20). Is the sin we’re talking about endangering this person’s ability to reflect Christ to the surrounding world? Is it a sign of larger struggles, or could it lead there?

The **second** point I want to make in response to the question “when should I go?” is that Jesus tells us to initiate a conversation whether we’re the offender or the offended. Matthew 18 tells the *wronged* person to seek reconciliation. But Matthew 5:23-24 says that if you think someone has something against you. That is, you’re the offender—then it’s *also* your obligation to speak up. Matthew 5 even says that if you’re on your way to worship God and you remember your brother has something against you, stop. Go and be reconciled. That’s how much Jesus cares about your relationships in the church!

That’s why it is critical for us to examine our relationships with others before coming to the Lord’s table. When there’s conflict, both the offender and the one who’s been wronged are to initiate reconciliation. It’s almost like we’re to trip over each other rushing to reconcile. What a great picture!

**[Questions]**

***Step #2: Taking one or two others***

Back to Matthew 18. If the offending person won’t listen—and it is clear that sin has been committed, we’re to take one or two others with us. This serves two purposes. First, the offender may more likely listen to a neutral third party than the person who’s been sinned against. This other person also serves to witness what happened at the meeting in case discipline advances to the next step.

Let me offer a few thoughts on this process if you ever find yourself at this stage. First, before you take this step, consider how objective the sin is. Are you confronting them because you think they are spending too much money or because you think they are prideful? Only God knows their heart. If this is a subjective issue like that, better to drop the matter and pray for the Holy Spirit to convict them. Second, if you move forward, make sure that the person or people you bring with you are trustworthy and discreet, impartial, and have good judgment. And third, let the offender know what you’re about to do. Don’t spring a conversation on them without warning. Fourth, be careful not to try to lobby the witness to your side; just let the facts speak for themselves.

***Step #3: Tell it to the church***

Well moving on to step #3, if the offender still refuses to listen, the church needs to be brought in. And they can excommunicate him if he still refuses to repent. In Matthew 18, Jesus doesn’t specify that the leaders of the church are to be consulted prior to taking the matter to the church. But certainly that intermediate step seems appropriate and consistent with these instructions. Looking at these steps in Matthew 18 then, we can see Jesus trying to involve the fewest number of people possible. But he’s willing to make things public if that’s what will wake up this offender. At the final state, he even uses those outside the church and Satan himself to providentially push toward repentance.

***IV. B. What if you see a member sin against another member?***

Well, Matthew 18 provides us with guidance about what to do when someone sins against *you*. But what if you just *observed* sin against another church member? What should you do then?

Well, the answer is, “it depends.” Galatians 6:1 tells us: “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.” And Luke 17:3: “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.” On the other hand, the Bible also warns us not to be busybodies looking for opportunities to point out faults in others[[1]](#footnote-1). All of us are sinners, and so it’d be impossible and, frankly, unproductive to call attention to every single sin we witness. So how do we know when is an appropriate time to approach a brother or sister about sin?

Let me offer some guidelines for your judgment:

**First**, is the sin bringing dishonor to God? Is it visible enough that it’s lying about God to non-Christians?

**Second**, is it hurting others by causing them to be tempted or by setting a bad example for younger Christians?

**Third**, could it lead to discord and disunity in the church?

**Fourth**, is it seriously harming the offender by damaging his relationship with God or in other ways?

If one or more of the answers are yes, then it would probably be appropriate to talk to the offender about the sin. The less relationship you have with the person, the higher the bar for talking with them. The better you know them, and the more trust in your relationship, the lower the bar.

***IV. C. What if someone sins in a way that’s heinous?***

Over the years, much as been made of the differences between the discipline case of 1 Corinthians 5—where Paul tells the church to expel a man sleeping with his father’s wife—and Matthew 18 that we just looked at. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul doesn’t ask about the man’s repentance; he simply instructs the church to put him out of fellowship. So what’s going on here? Is there some kind of “fast track” church discipline that Jesus didn’t describe?

Well, sort of. What seems to be going on in 1 Corinthians 5 is sin that was so heinous, so beyond what was acceptable in that society, that there’s really nothing the man could say to convince the church of his repentance. Generally, we follow the principle of “innocent until proven guilty.” You stay inside the church until through the steps of Matthew 18 it becomes evident that you’re not repentant. But sometimes the credibility of any claim to repentance is so shot that the church should move very quickly to move you outside their fellowship. Both for your good and the reputation of Christ, as we see in 1 Cor. 5. Then, if by God’s grace your claim to repentance becomes credible again, that ban of excommunication is removed.

***IV. D. How Do I Relate to Someone Who’s Been Excommunicated?***

Many times this will not be an issue because the individual has moved out of the area or no longer associates with the church or its members. But there have been several examples where our church voted to terminate a person’s membership, and the individual would often attend the church’s services after he’d been expelled, which is wonderful. We *want* that to happen. We want him to be constantly hearing God’s word and to be convicted of sin. But what if that person also starts showing up at church social events, like dinner after the evening service? What then?

Well, in I Cor. 5:11, we read that we should not “associate” with any such person. In Matthew 18:17, Jesus says to treat the person as you would a pagan or a tax collector. What does this look like in practice? Well, it means we should treat the individual as he’s an unbeliever. But not just any unbeliever; an unbeliever who tragically thinks he’s OK. So, we should encourage him to attend church as I just mentioned. And we should act lovingly and kindly towards him when we do see him. But when we see him, we should take care to exhort him to repent. We should never simply interact casually as if nothing is wrong—like we might another Christian or even a non-Christian who knows he’s a non-Christian. That’s the sense of 1 Cor. 5:11, “not even to eat with such a one.” Of course, when the excommunicated person is a family member or a co-worker, other Scriptural obligations we have to the relationship might often take precedence.

***IV. E. What if a church leader sins?***

Finally, the last topic I want to address this morning is what scripture says about sin among the church’s leaders. The guiding passage for these situations comes from 1 Tim. 5:19-20:

*Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.*

Paul’s giving special caution to protect elders from spurious attacks: before a discipline action against an elder can be brought, there must be two or three “witnesses.” The wisdom of this is clear: church leaders must often engage in situations that may lead to unfounded accusations against them.

With this passage in mind, let me address two situations that might arise in the church: first -- what if you hear rumors of an accusation against an elder. Second -- what if you encounter an elder in sin?

*Rumors of accusation*

What if someone tells you they’ve witnessed an elder sin—or think they have. What’s your responsibility? First and foremost, to ensure you’re not party to gossip and slander. Tell them to talk to that elder about it. Not to you. Just like you would in any other situation. Actively discourage them from slandering that elder in conversation like that.

There are two exceptions to this rule: if you too have witnessed that particular sin and this person is coming to you as per the requirement of a witness in 1 Timothy 5:19. Or if they’re asking you to serve as that witness even though you’ve not been an *eye*witness. More on that in a little bit.

*If you witness an elder in sin*

Second, what if an elder sins against you—or you witness an elder sinning? What do you do then? Quite simply, talk to them about it. Keep in mind that the situation may not be as it appears. So act humbly, remembering that they’re serving as an elder because, at least in the past, our church has found them to be above reproach. So it’s wise to give them the benefit of the doubt. What if you’re uncomfortable about approaching them? Perhaps (though I pray this never happens) they’ve sinned in intimidating or abusing you? It’s OK to approach another elder or individual in the church with your concern. Where your intent is to keep the matter quiet and discrete—and involve a minimal number of people, you’re not violating 1 Timothy 5:19.

OK—so let’s say that you’ve discussed the matter with the elder, perhaps opened the Scriptures to show them their sin—but they don’t repent. What now? Recall what I said earlier about how objective a sin is. If it’s an issue of pride—something you can’t be sure of—then stop pursuing the matter and pray. If the matter is something that’s objectively verifiable, though—like embezzlement, or sexual misconduct, for example—then you must continue to follow 1 Timothy 5:19. I say “must” because discipline, even discipline of an elder, is not optional in the church. This is your responsibility before God. What’s the next step? Speak with others you know witnessed the sin, and ask them to confront the elder with you—and if necessary, to bring the matter to other elders. They will be acting as the witnesses called for in 1 Timothy 5:19.

What if no one else is a witness? What then? Take for example, a hypothetical situation where an elder makes inappropriate advances toward a woman in the church, and the woman is the only witness. In those circumstances, the woman *can* talk to another mature member (most appropriately an elder) about the situation. And this would not contradict 1 Tim 5:19 because her accusation would not be sufficient by itself to trigger the formal discipline process laid out in that passage. In this regard, the specific language here is instructive. It says "[d]o not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses." In this case, the woman is not formally accusing an elder before the church—or asking that others accept an accusation as true. She’s merely asking that someone else help establish whether or not her claim is true. The woman’s disclosure to another person would lead to further inquiry by that person, and perhaps the elders. But that in itself wouldn’t trigger formal church discipline.

In order for formal church discipline to begin, the person who’s been wronged should bring forward one or more individuals who are willing to act as co-accusers with them. People who can fulfill the role of the witness in 1 Timothy 5:19 even if they have not been *eye*witnesses—because of their careful investigation, their knowledge of the accused, their knowledge of the accuser, etc. You can imagine that in a case like this, it’s usually best to approach another elder first because they’re more likely to have information about past accusations made against this elder. So they’re in the best position to fulfill that position of witness and co-accuser. Keep in mind what Paul has to say to church leaders immediately following these verses: “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.” Pretty heavy words. Your elders have unique accountability before God *not* to overlook sin in their midst.

The second thing Paul has to say in 1 Tim. 5:19-20 is that sin by a church leader is very serious. Paul’s command to rebuke a sinning elder publicly means that some statement of the nature of the offense must be made to the church. Even if they repent! To summarize what’s going on here: elders are more vulnerable to accusation. So Paul tells us to be more careful in determining their guilt. But sin by an elder can cause greater harm to the church. So even in the case of repentance, they’re dealt with more publicly.

**Conclusion**

So, why does church discipline matter? Because the church matters. And the church only matters when it’s different from the world. Think of Jesus’ words in Matthew 5. “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet” (5:13). Church discipline is the tool Jesus gave us all the way back in Matthew 18 when he inaugurated the church to keep us different from the world. When we look and feel different, we herald the gospel in a profoundly compelling way. We spur each other on toward love and good deeds. We protect the message of the gospel for the next generation. But when we become just like the world, all of this fades into nothingness.

So let’s strive together as a church to persevere in faith, using this tool of discipline when we must for the glory of God and the salvation of our world.

1. 2 Thess. 3:11, 1 Pet. 4:15 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)