

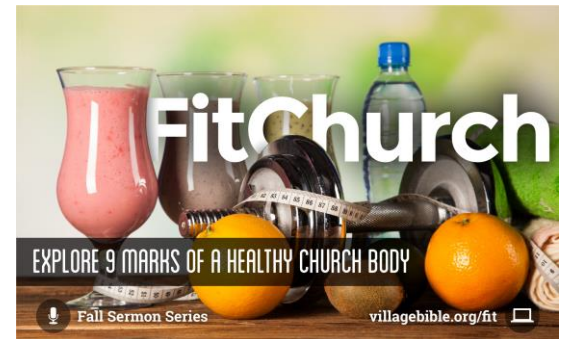


VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH
SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Healthy Churches Do the Hard Things

FitChurch: 9 Marks of a Healthy Church Body, Part 7

Tim Badal | November 2, 2014 | Matthew 18:15-20



Our church is dedicated to inspect its health. We have been asking probing questions in our series entitled, “Fit Church.” Practicing these marks of a healthy church isn’t easy. Becoming a healthy church takes effort—it doesn’t happen by just showing up on Sunday. One of the harder marks of a healthy church is something that is countercultural. It goes against popular opinion. Even if you’ve been in the church for a long time, you might grimace and squirm at the mention of this topic: church discipline. It is something that healthy churches will do because healthy churches do hard things.

Whether in personal nutrition or exercise regiments, making the healthy choice sometimes goes against nature. If you are trying to watch your waistline, you will have to forgo those sweet, succulent dishes. Hopefully, practicing this kind of self-denial will lead to good outcomes. If you are disciplined to do difficult things—like waking up early to run—a healthy body is the result. Healthy people do hard things.

Healthy churches do hard things and they do them well. Church discipline isn’t easy. It is one of the hardest things a church will do. However, every good and healthy church will practice church discipline because God’s Word commands us to do so. The reformers Calvin and Luther said that a healthy church:

- Biblically preaches God’s Word
- Properly administers the Lord’s Supper and Baptism
- Consistently and constantly practices discipline within the church

Even though Jesus Himself commands church discipline, many churches in our country have forsaken the practice. They have done this because they aren’t serious about taking God at His word. Doing hard things may involve going against the disposition of the culture. Is our church willing to do hard things?

Turn in your Bibles to Matthew 18:15-20. We are going to delve into what the Bible says about church discipline because Village Bible Church affirms the role that it plays in the life of the church. Our church will neither disregard nor be ashamed of practicing church discipline, but we will tell you why it is important, how you can be part of it and the love that must be part of the process. Here is what Jesus says to His disciples about church discipline:

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. 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.

Turn also to 1 Corinthians 5:1-13. The Apostle Paul specifically addresses the Corinthian church regarding church discipline. This particular text reminds us why we practice church discipline.

¹ 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. ³ For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. ⁴ When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. ⁶ Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? ⁷ Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ⁸ Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. ⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— ¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."

Church discipline is a subject that is incredibly alien to many Evangelical churches.

1. The Problems with Church Discipline

There are problems that need to be addressed. We have to confront the problems of:

Sin

Why does the Bible talk about church discipline? The easy answer is: sin. You are a sinner in need of God's grace. You are apart from God, rebels against Him and His Word. You rebel, not only against God, but also against His given authorities in your life. You live selfish and self-centered lives. Because of this rebellion and selfishness, God has provided His Word to keep us from veering off the right path.

In parenthood, discipline is a mechanism for loving mothers and fathers to teach their children the way they ought to go. When they choose to rebel against parental guidance, God has given parents the right to discipline their children in order to correct them from wrong beliefs and behaviors. It is a way to bring the child's selfishness and self-centeredness into check so that they can live productive lives. Likewise, church discipline is the role that the church plays—both leaders and its members—in correcting one another toward righteousness and truth.

Society

Sin won't be our only enemy in the pursuit of correction unto righteousness. Society wants nothing to do with church discipline—not only our culture, but also the Evangelical church. Churches don't practice it because they're afraid of church discipline. These things are difficult. They go against culture. They make people uncomfortable. Al Mohler says:

The decline of church discipline may be the most visible failure of the contemporary church. No longer concerned with maintaining purity of confession and lifestyle, the church today sees itself as a voluntary association of members with minimal moral accountability to God, much less to one another.

As a society, we will discard discipline. It will appear strange to even devote a sermon to the topic of church discipline, let alone practice it. Why do people despise church discipline?

1. Americans are individualistic by nature—revolutionaries by nature. Some examples are the phrases: "Don't tread on me", "I am my own person", etc. This individualism cannot be part of our attitude in the church. God has not called us to be solitary Christians. There are no "lone-ranger" Christians. We are called to be members of one body, loving one another, spurring one another on toward love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24). This togetherness means correcting one another from wandering away from the truth.
2. The consumer-driven model of ministry. In the 21st century, churches have bought into the idea that the parishioner is the customer. They seek to make churchgoers comfortable. Their goal becomes getting people to like what the church doing. In a market-driven, seeker-friendly congregation, church discipline will be the last thing practiced. If "the customer is always right," why would the church ever correct them?
3. People are ignorant of the practice. Perhaps this is the first time that you've ever been exposed to the term church discipline. Maybe you've never read the passages that deal with the issue (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; etc.). Hopefully, this sermon will help you work through this issue.
4. People misuse the words of Jesus, "Judge not, that you be not judged" (Matthew 7:1). They think, "The role of the Christian is not to judge anyone. They do not have the right to judge because Jesus is the Judge." That mindset is a

misinterpretation. When you judge one another you need to remember that you are also a sinner. If you see a speck in someone's eye and you go to get it out, remember that there is a log in your own eye (Matthew 7:3-5). When you judge someone else, you do not judge them out of your own perfection or holiness, but as a fellow sinner. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul tells us that our job is not to judge the world, but as a follower of Jesus Christ, we are expected to judge one another. Again, we must do this in a spirit of gentleness and love. Remember that you too are prone to sin.

5. It gets bad press. Many of you have probably heard horror stories about how churches have hurt individuals and shunned them in ungodly and unbiblical ways. In books like *The Crucible*, the church is guilty of gross misconduct in how it dealt with the Salem Witch Trials. People were burned at the stake and drowned because they were accused of being witches. In *The Scarlet Letter*, a woman is shunned because she becomes pregnant as the result of an adulterous affair. The church pins a scarlet "A" to the woman's chest. The readers later discover that it was the pastor himself who was the father of the child. Examples like this fill us with indignation because of how the church has behaved in its discipline.

In the midst of the difficulties of church discipline, Village Bible Church is committed to its practice. We believe that it is something God has commanded. How do we know that?

2. The policy that addresses the situation

Every workplace and school has a policy handbook that communicates the framework by which things will be done. For believers, the Bible is our handbook for living the Christian life. Church discipline is part of that handbook. Therefore there are a few reasons why we practice church discipline.

The holiness of God demands it

God is a holy God (Leviticus 19:2). There is no sin in Him (1 John 3:5). He does not lie (Numbers 23:19; Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18). There is no question of His purity. He is God and there is none like Him (1 Samuel 2:2). Here is the problem: This God—Whom there is no one like, Who sits in Heaven—has saved a group of people for Himself called Christians, but these people are still sinners. Our sins have been covered by the blood of Jesus on the cross, but we still live lives that fail to live up to God's standard. What does God do? Does He just leave us alone and let us wallow in our sin? No! The Bible makes it clear that we must be holy as God is holy (Leviticus 20:26; 1 Peter 1:16). How can God expect us to be holy? Because we have Christ, the hope of glory, within us (Colossians 1:27). We can live upright and holy lives because of what Christ has done. How can God, Who is holy, make dirty rotten scoundrels like us holy?

The answer is in Hebrews 12:5-11:

And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

⁵ *"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.*

⁶ *For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives."*

⁷ *It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?* ⁸ *If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.* ⁹ *Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?* ¹⁰ *For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.* ¹¹ *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.*

God will make us a holy people through discipline. Every parent knows that this is the same reason why they discipline their children. Parents don't discipline because they hate their children, but because they love them. Do you want to be disciplined by the loving hand of a father? Or do you want to be handcuffed and taken away by the police? Someone will discipline you in this life. Would you prefer someone who desires the best for you, or have the government come, incarcerate you and force you to do the things you should? God says, "I love you enough to discipline you and make you better people because of the work of My Son on the cross."

The Scriptures declare it

Many passages in Scripture both command and give God's directive as to the how, why, when and where of church discipline. A church that does not practice church discipline is absurd and misses the mark. This is an important thing. Jesus Himself describes a time when the church may have to rebuke a person in the congregation and tell them, "Repent! If you don't, we may take away our public affirmation that you follow God." When that happens, it does not mean that the church consigns that person to hell or that the sinner can never change. Rather, when the church disciplines one of its members, the church says, "The way you are living now is out of step with what God commands His followers to be like. We can no longer call you a brother or a sister in Christ because you continue to rebel against the ways of God." If the Bible says this, shouldn't we as Christ-followers obey?

But there's a problem. Maybe one of the reasons why churches don't practice church discipline is because they see these Scriptures as suggestions. They think Jesus is saying, "Here's an idea. It's just My humble opinion. You don't have to practice church discipline. It's an option." Sometimes people take commands of Scripture and think they are only descriptive, rather than prescriptive.

Other churches might affirm the need for church discipline, but they don't believe that there are unrepentant members in their midst. That is like parents failing to discipline their children because they think their children are perfect. All children sin and rebel, and they need a loving parent to come and discipline them. People are so prone to self-deception. We are prone to think that we are good when we're really not. We need the Scriptures to open our eyes and pierce our hearts and tell us what we need to do.

If we fail at church discipline, it is because we disregard the commands of our Savior for the sake of cultural relevance and popularity. Why don't you discipline your children? It is because you want to be their friend, not their parent. You are more worried about relationship than you are concerned for the soul of the child living in your home. Disciplining one another with the grace and truth of Christ will always be unpopular in the eyes of the world.

The church must display it

We have a decision to make. If God's holiness demands church discipline and Scripture declares it, then the church must *always* do it. The church cannot take Scripture and throw it away. It must practice it. If the church does not practice church discipline, it will lose its purity.

In 1 Corinthians, sin was running amok and the Apostle Paul called the church completely carnal. They were not dealing with sin. They were committing sins that even the world considered sinful. The world had become purer than the church. In order for the church to remain pure, it had to deal with sin. In order to receive God's blessing, sin must be dealt with in the church.

Joshua 7 tells the story of the battle of Jericho. The battle was won and afterwards, the Israelites went to the small town of Ai. It should have been an easy conquest after defeating Jericho. Israel takes on this town and they lose horribly. Joshua asks the Lord, "What went wrong?" God tells Joshua, "There is sin in the camp." Was everyone sinning? No. Just one man. It took one individual, Achan, who had stolen precious things from Jericho, to bring judgment on the entire nation. Why do we have to deal with our sins in the church as a whole? Because even one sin can keep us from the corporate blessings of God. God takes sin seriously.

Church discipline must be done because our testimony matters. If the church is casual toward sin and disobedience while professing a relationship with Jesus Christ, it will hinder the preaching of the gospel. The church will cease being God's ambassador and become a tool of the devil. This casual attitude sends mixed messages to a world that needs to hear the gospel.

How do we deal with sin?

3. The people and scenarios of church discipline

Who receives church discipline? When should they receive it?

All Christians

Church discipline is for all Christians. If we call ourselves children of God, we are under the discipline of God. If God is your Father, then He will chastise you and correct the direction in which you are heading. How does He do this? He uses other Christians and the church. When you live for yourself, there are consequences. You cannot do whatever you want as long as it

doesn't bother anyone. If the hand does something, the whole body will feel it. As part of this body of believers, you cannot do anything in isolation. You will impact the entire body for good or ill. All Christians are under the discipline of God. When you say that you are loved by God, you declare to the world that you welcome His discipline in your life.

Those caught in sin

Galatians 6:1 says, *"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."* This passage talks about sin in general; there will be moments when we sin. We are "prone to wander; prone to leave the God we love." There will be times when we give in to the temptation of sin. These aren't premeditated sins

Church discipline acts like the Good Samaritan. It comes alongside the caught individual, gets down on its hands and knees, grabs the trap and opens it. However, as we help the believer out of a trap, we can get caught ourselves. We need to be careful to avoid that dangerous, spring-loaded trap. Help the other believer out of it with care. The job of church discipline is not to merely decide that a person must be kicked out of a church; it begins sooner than that. It begins by coming alongside those who are caught in sin.

Those who are in conflict with others

Matthew 18:5-15 is a manual for church conflict resolution. *"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone."* The Bible is honest. It doesn't ever say that when you become a Christian you will immediately like everyone. Some of the pillars of the church had quarrels with one another—Peter and Paul; the women at Philippi; Paul and Barnabas. In Acts 15, there was such a conflict over Gentile inclusion that it resulted in a council being held in Jerusalem to resolve the issue. When Christians get together, sparks may fly. We are different. We have different preferences. We have different understandings. We come from different backgrounds. There are different generations. These differences can cause even the most godly individuals to butt heads. Yet, the Scriptures provide us with a way to resolve these conflicts.

Sadly, when one Christian sins against another, instead of addressing that issue one on one, they may gossip. Sometimes this gossip takes the form of a "prayer request." However, Matthew 18 calls you to go to your brother or sister and resolve that conflict between the two of you. You need to love that person and love your Lord enough to not allow that conflict to continue. Love that person enough to not allow envy and bitterness to well up inside your heart. When a person has wronged you, you have the great privilege of winning them back. You have an opportunity to lead your brother or sister back to the Lord. However, when you confront a brother or a sister about the speck in his or her eye, ask yourself these questions:

- Can love cover this sin?
- Is there someone whom I have offended in the same way? How can I make that right? The Bible tells us that if we have offended someone, we should not even worship until that conflict is resolved. Matthew 5:23-24 says, *"So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."* Don't come and worship if you are out of fellowship with someone. Make it right first. You cannot say that you love God without loving your brother or sister (1 John 4:20). Be aware of those conflicts.

Those who live in contradiction to the Word

Why do we discipline people? We discipline professing believers who do not follow the commands of God. A believer who continually chooses not to follow God's commands is a living oxymoron. You cannot say that you are a follower of Jesus Christ and never choose to follow Him. If you are unwilling to deal with your sin, you deserve discipline. You deserve it when you are spiritually idle. You deserve it when you are divisive. You deserve it when you practice immorality. You deserve it when you are a false teacher. You deserve it if you harbor any unrepentant sin that continues to grow in your life. You need your brothers and sisters to come alongside you and confront you in love and respect.

4. The process and the steps to follow

How do you confront your brother or your sister? Church discipline is both formative and corrective.

Formative

First and foremost, remember that church discipline is formative. Church discipline happens in such a way that you might not even know that it is taking place. For example, when you sit and listen to a sermon, you are being formally disciplined by the Word of God. As you open God's Word in your own personal time of study, you are growing in godliness and holiness. Every time you pray and open God's Word, you cultivate godliness in your life. This godliness is of great gain to you (1 Timothy 6:6).

Every day, my wife and I disciple our sons in godliness. We tell them to treat their teachers with respect when they go to school, to show love to their enemies, to pray for the people who wrong them. In the same way, every ministry of the church—both public and private—cultivates godliness in the lives of people.

Corrective

When formative discipline doesn't work, or when someone chooses to disobey God's commands, corrective discipline is needed to stop a person from veering off God's path. In a church there will be times when you will be confronted and corrected. You will be called to repent by the loud voice of another believer, in addition to the still-small voice of the Spirit. In that correction, the consequences of our sin are felt. Matthew 18 gives us a guide for how church discipline should be done. It involves:

- **Private interaction.** In Matthew 18:15, if a person has wronged you, you must go and show that brother or sister his or her faults. If they repent, you have won your brother or sister. The confrontation is over. Discipline is over.
- **Pairs to verify.** However, if your brother or sister refuses to listen to you, take a pair of witnesses to verify the sin you see in his or her life (Matthew 18:16). These people can either verify the sin in that person's life, or they can attest to the fact that the brother or sister is unwilling to change. If the person repents, you have won them back. Bring them back into fellowship.
- **Public rebuke.** In Matthew 18:17, *"If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church."* If the person still refuses to repent, bring their sin before the church. How do we involve the church? The church is involved through membership. A member's sin is brought before the church so that the congregation can pray for that person and so that others who have a relationship with the rebellious brother or sister may confront that individual in love and truth. Sometimes that process wins a brother or sister, and the church receives that person back into the fold.
- **Putting them out.** If the person still refuses to listen to the church, then the congregation treats them *"as a Gentile and a tax collector."* This means that the church withdraws their public affirmation of that individual as a believer. This involves putting them out of the church. First Corinthians 5:2 describes a time where sin is so flamboyant that a group of Christians should say, "You are no longer welcome in our church. You are living like the world. You have no desire to follow the Word of God. You have no desire to submit to the authority of the Church. Because of all these things, the church is no longer going to be part of your life. You want to live like the world? Go live like the world in the world."

At that moment, the church hands that individual over to Satan (1 Corinthians 5:5). What does that mean? The church hands them over to the world that is led by the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is at work within the disobedient (Ephesians 2:2). If a person no longer listens to God or His people, he or she is given over to listen to the devil. This is a heart-breaking thing to do. This church does not discipline in this way as pious policemen, but as broken-hearted family members.

Village Bible Church seeks to be a place of grace where we lovingly pursue one another for reconciliation and restoration as our goal so that we might live holy lives to the glory of God. By "a place of grace" our church seeks to remember that all people are sinners. When we deal with the sin of another person, we endeavor to make our lives right with God beforehand. In Matthew 18, if we only go to verse 20, we miss the full picture of confrontation. In the very next passage (Matthew 18:21-35), Jesus tells the parable of the unforgiving servant. When church discipline occurs, it must be grace-filled, merciful and loving. This means doing the hard things. If not for the grace of God, we would all fall into the same pattern of sin.

Why is reconciliation and restoration our goal? It is our goal because we serve a Savior Who said that His mission was to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). This must be our job as well. We need to go after the lost and broken. Sometimes we need to leave the 99 and go after the one who has run away (Matthew 18:10-14). Elders keep watch over the flock, seeking out those who need to be brought back. They don't do this yelling and screaming, but by lovingly imploring the sheep to come back and rejoice the flock before it is too late. There is forgiveness in the cross of Jesus Christ.

God demands holiness in His church. If we are not maintaining that through church discipline, then we have ceased to do what healthy churches ought to do. Village Bible Church practices church discipline, knowing that we too are sinners. Knowing that God has given grace to us, we give grace to others. However, sometimes grace means disciplining one another, even when it is difficult. This is a hard truth, but healthy churches do hard things.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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