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DEALING WITH SINNING CHRISTIANS (An Overview of Church Discipline)

Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

By

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Special Message

Dealing With Sinning Christians
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Years ago, I read about a pastor who became involved immorally with a married woman in his congregation. They each divorced their respective mates and then were married to each other in the church of which he was the pastor. The congregation turned out en masse for the wedding, giving open support.

That tragic story reflects the dominant mood in the American church today, that we should show love and tolerance to those who fall into sin. That mentality is behind the push to accept practicing, unrepentant homosexuals as church members and even as pastors. Even among churches that would not condone these things, there are very few that practice biblical church discipline towards those who persist in sin. Pastor John MacArthur reports (foreword, *A Guide to Church Discipline*, by J. Carl Laney [Bethany House, 1985], p. 7) that a leading pastor once told him, "If you discipline church members, they'll never stand for it, and you'll empty the place. You can't run around sticking your nose into everyone's sin."

If you've ever attended MacArthur's church, you know that that pastor's advice was *not* prophetic! The place is not exactly empty! But neither was that pastor's advice biblical. Following his counsel would put us in disobedience to the words of the Lord Jesus and the apostle Paul. Scripture is clear:

The church must practice biblical church discipline toward professing Christians who persist in known sin.

Perhaps no verse is so taken out of context and misapplied as Matthew 7:1, "Do not judge so that you will not be judged." If you keep reading, in verse 6 Jesus says, "Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine...." In verse 15 He adds, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves." To obey those verses, you must make some fairly astute judgments! You must judge that a person is a dog or a swine or a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Furthermore, in 1 Corinthians 5:12, Paul tells the church that they are responsible to judge those within the church. Practicing biblical church discipline does not violate Jesus' command, "Judge not."

I realize that for some of you who do not have much background in the Bible, this topic will sound as if we're trying to revive the Salem witch trials or the Inquisition. But the Bible is our standard for faith and practice and it has much to say about this subject. While I cannot be comprehensive, I want to give an overview of biblical church discipline. We will consider the purposes of church discipline, the problems that require church discipline, and the procedure for church discipline.

THE PURPOSES FOR CHURCH DISCIPLINE:

We may consider these purposes in four directions:

1. Toward God, church discipline vindicates publicly His honor and holiness.

God's holiness is a dominant theme in the Bible. It means that He is totally apart from and opposed to all sin. In the Old Testament, God told His people Israel (Lev. 19:2), "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." The New Testament repeats that command (1 Pet. 1:15-16). Peter refers to the church as a holy priesthood and a holy nation (1 Pet. 2:5, 9).

Because of this, when God's people sin, He will disassociate Himself from them and take them through severe discipline if they do not repent and deal with the sin in their midst. You see this often in the Old Testament (e.g., the story of Achan, Joshua 7), and also in the New Testament. In the messages to the churches in Revelation 2 & 3, the Lord repeatedly warns that if they do not deal with their sins, He will set Himself against the church and even remove that church's lampstand. God would rather have no testimony in a city than to have His name mingled with sin.

2. Toward the church itself, church discipline restores purity and deters others from sinning.

In 1 Corinthians 5:7, Paul commands, "Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened." Leaven (yeast) is a type of sin. If you put a small amount of yeast in flour, it spreads throughout the entire lump (5:6). Paul is

saying symbolically what he also (5:2, 13) states plainly, that the church needed to remove the sinning man so that the purity of the church would be restored and the sin would not spread any further.

You can see this principle in a family. If the parents do not consistently and impartially discipline a defiant child, very soon the other children learn that there are no consequences if they disobey their parents. The sin of the first child spreads to the others. The same thing happens in a classroom with a teacher who does not enforce discipline. Soon the entire class is out of control. On the government level, if the authorities do not enforce the laws, the whole country soon devolves into anarchy.

In the local church, God has given authority to the elders (Heb. 13:17). Part of their responsibility is to uphold God's standards of holiness and do all that they can to keep the church doctrinally and morally pure. For example, take a single Christian woman who knowingly disobeys Scripture by marrying an unbeliever. If the elders do not deal with her sin, other single women in the church, who have been waiting on the Lord for a Christian husband, will be tempted to date and marry unbelievers. The biblical standard that believers should only marry believers would be diluted and sin would spread through the church.

If we don't uphold God's standards of holiness, it doesn't take long for the church to become just like the world. Although the city of Corinth was infamous for its sexual promiscuity, this sin went beyond what the pagans practiced (1 Cor. 5:1)! But, it didn't shock the Corinthian church! They were actually boasting about their acceptance and love toward this man who was intimate with his stepmother (5:2)! The woman was probably not a believer, or Paul would have told the church to remove her as well. But he says that they should have mourned and removed this man from their midst. Sin in other professing Christians should cause us to mourn, not to be tolerant. God would rather that a local church be pure and small than that it be big, but tolerant of sin in its midst.

3. Toward the world, church discipline displays God's standards of holiness and draws a line between the church and the world.

To attempt to attract people from the world into the church, today's church seems bent on showing the world, "See, we're just

like you are. We're normal folks. We watch raunchy movies and TV shows, just as you do. We have marital problems and get divorced just as frequently as you do. We won't judge sexual immorality of any kind, because we're tolerant people, just as you are. Come and join us!"

But Scripture is clear that the church is to be distinct from the world by being separated unto our God, who is holy. I'm not talking about adding legalistic rules for things that are not in the Bible, but rather about being a people who are captivated by the beauty of God in His holiness, so that we willingly distance ourselves from this corrupt world. As 1 John 2:15 puts it, "Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him."

Toward God, church discipline vindicates publicly His honor and holiness. Toward the church itself, church discipline restores purity and deters others from sinning. Toward the world, church discipline displays God's standards of holiness and draws a line between the church and the world.

4. Toward the offender, church discipline conveys biblical love and seeks to restore the sinner.

Some wrongly think that love is opposed to discipline. But the Bible is clear that we cannot love our brothers and sisters in Christ if we do not deal with their sins in the way that God prescribes. Because God loves us, He disciplines us so that we may share His holiness (Heb. 12:6, 10). Because sin destroys people and relationships, to be indifferent toward someone who is sinning is really to hate that person.

Also, as we've seen, sin is like yeast that spreads throughout the whole lump of dough. It's like a contagious disease. If it isn't checked, it will infect others. That's why James (5:19-20) says, "My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." Love seeks to turn a sinner from his sin.

The goal in church discipline is never vindictive. We are not seeking to punish people or to throw them out of the church. Our aim is to restore the offender. In Galatians 6:1, Paul writes, "Breth-

ren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted." "Looking to yourself" implies that you, too, could fall into sin. So, do not be self-righteous or condescending. "Gentleness" does not mean weakness, but strength under the control of God Spirit. Whether we sharply rebuke (Gal. 2:11-14; Matt. 16:23; Titus 1:13) or gently appeal should be determined by what we think will be the most effective in restoring the sinner to obedient fellowship with God.

Some will ask, "But what if it doesn't work?" The answer is, we need to be obedient to God and leave the results to Him. There is no biblical guarantee that it will work every time. Jesus said (Matt. 18:15b), "*if he listens to you, you have won your brother.*"

THE PROBLEMS THAT REQUIRE CHURCH DISCIPLINE:

First, I will give the principle and then comment briefly: *We should deal with any professing believer who associates with this church and is knowingly and rebelliously disobeying the clear commandments of Scripture.*

ü The person must be a professing believer.

Paul had written a now lost letter in which he told the church not to associate with immoral people (1 Cor. 5:9). Now he clarifies that he did not mean unbelievers, but rather a "so-called brother" who is immoral or covetous or an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or a swindler (5:11). He states (5:12) that it is God's business to judge those outside of the church, but it is the church's responsibility to judge those within the church. Our first step should be to make sure that the sinning person understands the gospel. Sometimes the problem is that the person is not truly born again.

ü The person must associate with this church.

Our church constitution and by-laws spell out that by joining this church, you are submitting to the process of church discipline. But, also, if someone attends this church regularly and especially if he is involved in any church ministry, we must practice church discipline. The testimony of this church is at stake, and the world doesn't check to see if the person is an official member.

ü The person must be knowingly and rebelliously disobedient.

This calls for discernment. Paul writes (1 Thess. 5:14), "And we urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone." We should not encourage the unruly, but admonish him. We should not admonish the faint-hearted or weak, but encourage and help them. Sometimes, a newer believer is in sin due to ignorance of God's Word. He is weak. But, if he continues defiantly in the sin after you show him what the Word says, he then becomes unruly.

I find the analogy of child rearing helpful here. If my three-year-old was acting like a three-year-old, I tried to help him learn how to behave in a more mature manner. But I didn't discipline him for being three. But when your three-year-old is defiant, you must deal with his rebellion. If a believer is overcome by a sin, but is repentant and wants help, you help him. But if he says, "I have a right to do as I please," he is defiant and needs discipline.

ü The person must be disobeying the clear commands of Scripture.

You don't discipline someone for areas on which the Bible has no clear commandments. Drinking alcoholic beverages is not grounds for discipline; drunkenness is. Watching movies is not grounds for discipline; watching pornographic movies is. Scripture contains many lists of sins (1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 4:25-5:6; 1 Tim. 1:9-10; 2 Tim. 3:2-5; etc.). We may summarize these as:

- (1) Violations of God's moral commandments (1 Cor. 5:10-11; 6:9-10; 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:3-5).
- (2) Unresolved relational sins, such as gossip, slander, anger, and abusive speech (Matt. 18:15-20; Eph. 4:25-31; Gal. 5:19-21; Col. 3:8).
- (3) Divisiveness in the church (Rom. 16:17-18; Titus 3:10; 3 John 9-10).
- (4) False teaching on major doctrines (Gal. 1:8-9; 1 Tim. 1:20; 6:3-5; 2 John 9-11).
- (5) Disorderly conduct and refusal to work (2 Thess. 3:6-15; 1 Tim. 5:8).

How do we deal with those who persist in such sins?

THE PROCEDURE FOR CHURCH DISCIPLINE:

The Scriptures give the following steps:

1. A private meeting (Matt. 18:15).

“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.” Usually it is better to go in person (rather than talk over the phone), unless there are concerns for physical safety or propriety. Do not put yourself in a potentially compromising situation with the opposite sex.

Your objective is not to “set him straight” or to “get things off your chest” by letting him know how wrong he is. Your aim is to get him to listen so as to win him back to the Lord. The Greek word translated “show him his fault” is a legal term that means to convince in a court of law. The best way of convincing someone of his sin is to take him to Scripture. Your opinion really doesn’t matter. God’s Word is the authority.

Jesus says that if you have knowledge of your brother’s sin, then *you* (not the pastor) are the one to go to him. While you should *pray* before you go, you should not call 15 people to have them pray. That just spreads gossip. You may need to seek godly counsel, but limit the circle of knowledge to those who can help.

Also, *check your own heart first*, to make sure that you’ve taken any logs out of your own eye (Matt. 7:3-5). You are not exempt from temptation and sin, so look to yourself (Gal. 6:1). *Check your motives*. If you are going to try to prove that he’s wrong and you’re right, you’re going for the wrong reason. You should go in obedience to God, with the aim of restoring your brother to God and to those he has wronged.

Make sure that you *get the facts*. If someone tells you about someone else’s sin, tell the informant to go directly to the sinning person in line with these guidelines. Do not go to someone on the basis of hearsay or gossip, unless you are going to find out the facts. Go in *gentleness* (strength under control) and *wisdom*. Sometimes, there is a need for sharp rebuke (Titus 1:13; 2:15), but usually the best course is a brotherly, heartfelt appeal (1 Tim. 5:1-2). If the sinning person knows that you genuinely care for him, he will be more likely to listen and respond positively.

How many times should you go to the person before going to the next level? Scripture does not say. If the person repents, the discipline process stops there. You have won your brother. The exception to this would be a situation where the person's sin is publicly known. For example, if a woman gets pregnant out of wedlock, she (and the man, if he is in the church) needs to make a public confession, so that the church can openly forgive her and support her in having her child. Or if a Christian man is convicted of a crime that is made public, even if he repents, he needs to ask the church to forgive him for dishonoring the name of Christ.

2. A private conference with witnesses.

If the person does not listen to you, Jesus says to take two or three witnesses (Matt. 18:16). These may be others who know of the problem or it may include church leaders. The point is to strengthen the reproof and to cause the offender to realize the seriousness of the situation. Your goal is to bring the sinner to repentance and restoration.

3. A public announcement to the church.

Although Christ does not specify, other Scriptures indicate that this step should be administered through the church leaders, who have authority over the church (Heb. 13:17). Before an announcement is made to the church, the leaders should make an effort to contact the offender and warn him that his sin will become public knowledge on a particular date if he does not repent before that time.

If the sin has to be made public, the church should be instructed in how to relate to the sinning person. Church members should no longer fellowship with the person as if there is no problem. Paul says not even to eat with such a one (1 Cor. 5:11). He tells the Thessalonians not to associate with such a one, but then adds, "And yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother" (2 Thess. 3:14-15). This shows that all contact is not forbidden, but we aren't to relate on a normal, buddy-buddy level that ignores the person's sin. Any contact must communicate, "We love you and we want you back in the fellowship of the church, but we can't condone what you're doing and we can't accept you back until you genuinely repent."

4. Public exclusion from the church.

The Lord says that the final step is, "Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer" (Matt. 18:17). Paul says, "Remove the wicked man from among yourselves" (1 Cor. 5:13; also, 5:2). It seems to me that Paul combines steps 3 & 4, mentioning the man's sin before the church and excluding him from the fellowship at the same time. If someone's sin is damaging the reputation of the church, he needs to be removed from the fellowship quickly.

5. Public restoration when there is genuine repentance.

Sadly, some love their sin more than they love Christ and they will not repent. Others do not repent and find another church that accepts them in spite of their sin. That is too bad. Churches should not welcome those who are under the discipline of another church. But some will repent, which involves godly sorrow over their sin (2 Cor. 7:8-10) and restitution where appropriate (Philemon 18-19). A person's deeds should reflect repentance (Acts 26:20).

If the person expresses genuine repentance, then the church should be informed and the person should be forgiven and accepted back into the fellowship (2 Cor. 2:8). Of course, there should be a time of proving before a repentant person is put into positions of ministry or leadership. Also, the restoration process should include some training or discipling to help the person grow and avoid the sin in the future.

Conclusion

The church is not a fellowship of sinless people. We are a fellowship of forgiven sinners who, by God's grace, are pursuing a life of holiness and obedience to our Lord. We dare not fall into spiritual pride by thinking that we are better than a member who has fallen into sin. Paul says that our response to sin in a church member should be to mourn (1 Cor. 5:2).

But if we do not deal with those who refuse to repent of sin as the Lord commands, His church will soon blend in with the world and the salt will lose its savor. The Lord warns that He will come and remove our lampstand (Rev. 2:5). So we must practice biblical church discipline toward professing Christians who persist in sin.

Application Questions

1. How do you know when to confront a sinning Christian? Since we're all sinners in process, what sins need confrontation?
2. What should a church do if a member who is close to another member under discipline refuses to break fellowship?
3. How should family members relate to a sinning family member who is under church discipline?
4. How would you answer the objection that church discipline will drive people away and that we can't minister to people who leave our church?
5. In light of the possibility of a lawsuit, is church discipline advisable in our day? Why/why not?

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