

The Purpose of Discipline

Matthew 18:15-17 is a familiar passage to most Christians. Its application is pretty straightforward. We might quibble about how long this process should take, but there's no question about the order it should follow. First the individual, then a few, then the church. If somebody won't repent even then, they can no longer be part of the church.

However, our analysis of church discipline can't end there. In this area, as is often the case with the commandments of the Lord, the why is just as important as the what. For instance, it is true that we are commanded to sing, but if we sing without worshiping, we are no more pleasing to God than if we hadn't bothered to sing at all. Here too, we must pay attention to the reasons God gives for this commandment. Let's consider this evening, then, the purpose of church discipline.

Let's begin, though, by talking about WHAT IT ISN'T. For our starting point here, let's take Ephesians 5:1-2. In the way we treat one another, our standard is to be the love of Christ. As He gave Himself for us, we are to give ourselves for one another.

This means, then, that the exercise of church discipline can't ever be selfish. I think there are two main applications here, and the first is that it can't be an expression of anger. Some wayward Christian has really torqued off the elders, and so as he's on his way out the door, they slam the door behind him by withdrawing from him. Though I haven't seen this here, thankfully, I've certainly seen it elsewhere.

Let's be honest, friends. If we're involved in this kind of behavior, it's not really about the sinner. It's about us and our wounded pride. From a spiritual perspective, making sure that the erring brother gets told does him no good, and it does us a great deal of harm.

We must similarly beware of church discipline as a form of spiritual bookkeeping. Well, Sister So-and-So hasn't assembled with the saints since 2013, and nobody knows where she is or what she's up to, so I guess we'd better send a letter to her last known address and let the congregation know that she's no longer a member. Brethren, that's shameful! Christ gave His life for that sister, but we couldn't be bothered to give her our attention.

Every Christian here must matter to all of us because they matter to God. We are our brothers' keepers, and if we let brethren drift away without bothering to contact them, we have failed in our duty. Crossing them off the roster does nothing to mitigate that failure.

However, there are valid reasons for the exercise of church discipline. The first is TO MAINTAIN GOD'S STANDARDS. Here, let's consider the sad testimony of 1 Corinthians 5:1-2. In this text, Paul reports that the Corinthians were tolerating behavior that was unacceptable not only according to the law of God, but even

according to the standards of the pagans around them! The Corinthians needed to get rid of the sinner, or else they would make God's church into a laughingstock.

So too today, God's church is responsible for enforcing God's morality on its members. We simply cannot tolerate sin in our midst, and if somebody refuses to stop sinning, he must go. Any other alternative will cause God's authority to be regarded with contempt.

Let me give you an illustration. I haven't seen this myself, but I've heard of congregations of the Lord's people that no longer bother enforcing Matthew 19. As a result, in the Sunday morning assembly, on one side of the auditorium, you've got the man who left his first wife for his secretary at work. He's since married her, and they and their kids are here for worship. On the other side of the auditorium, you've got the man's first wife, glaring daggers across the aisle at him. What a sorry spectacle that would be!

Even worse, it would undermine any attempt to enforce any of God's standards. Let's say that you've got a young Christian woman there who decides she wants to be a lesbian and starts bringing her girlfriend to services. The elders try to talk to her about it, but she tells them, "How come Brother Adulterer over there gets a pass and I don't? You stay out of his private business, so you need to stay out of mine too." Frankly, once a church starts picking and choosing which sins are acceptable and which aren't, it has descended into hypocrisy. The only way to keep this from happening is to exercise church discipline and to exercise it consistently.

Similarly, church discipline is important TO GUARD AGAINST CORRUPTION. Consider 1 Corinthians 5:6-7. All of us know that we are influenced by the people we associate with. Wicked people will have a negative influence on us, and arguably the most dangerous negative influence of all comes from wicked people we don't recognize as wicked.

This is particularly a danger for younger Christians. When I look back on my younger days, I can only shake my head at some of my choices in friends. Surely, only by the grace of God and the prayers of my mother did I avoid being dragged down with them! Some of the friends who were most spiritually dangerous to me were people who were nominally Christians, but didn't act like Christians. Because I knew they went to church too, I had trouble recognizing their sinful conduct as sinful.

Obviously, there's not a lot a congregation can do when a Christian sins secretly. However, once that sin becomes open, the church has to act for the sake of its younger and less mature members. This is where the idea of "taking note of" in 2 Thessalonians 3 comes in. If my family and I are hiking along a cliffside path and I see a loose rock, I will want my children to take note of it. I'll say, "Don't step there. It's dangerous."

It's equally important to warn against spiritually dangerous brethren, to say, "Don't hang out with him. He'll get you into trouble." This is necessary not only for unfaithful Christians who are continuing to assemble for whatever reason, but also for those who have stopped. Otherwise, unwary brethren might assume that associating with them is a perfectly risk-free thing to do and end up in a pit right next to them.

Third, church discipline is important **TO MAKE OTHERS FEARFUL OF SINNING**. Consider 1 Timothy 5:19-20. This text is particularly about elders who have sinned, but there are some things in it that I think are generally applicable, and one of them is the effect of public rebuke. Whether the sinner is an elder or not, the experience should make others fearful of sinning.

I think this is true in a couple of different ways. First, and probably least importantly, seeing somebody get withdrawn from publicly may lead wavering Christians to decide that they don't want to get withdrawn from. Nobody likes the idea of getting publicly marked as unfaithful in front of a whole bunch of their friends. What's more, withdrawals are especially difficult for the sinner's relatives in the congregation who have remained faithful. Do you really want to put your parents through hearing your name get read out by an elder? How about your spouse? Certainly, the spiritual consequences of withdrawal are much more severe, but even the social consequences are nothing to laugh at.

Additionally, withdrawals make us fearful of sinning because they show us that falling away is possible. All of us have known Christians who started down a spiritually dangerous road, had brethren warn them about it, but replied, "Don't worry; I'll never let it happen to me." Sadly, brethren like this nearly always do let it happen to them, and they pay a heavy price for their foolishness.

However, the rest of us can benefit from their example. Every time we learn that a brother has made shipwreck of his faith, it reminds us that, yes, that can happen to us too if we're not careful. Even those who have been Christians for decades are still vulnerable. As a result, their bad example should lead us to keep a closer eye on our own spiritual direction.

Finally, church discipline is important **TO SAVE THE SINNER**. Let's go back to the chapter where we started and look at 1 Corinthians 5:4-5. In some ways, Paul's language here is confusing. When he talks about delivering the wrongdoer to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, Paul is really talking about how falling away changes the sinner's relationships with everybody else who is still in the kingdom. We're still on the inside, but they're on the outside, and we can't have the same association with them that we used to. Their decisions have ruptured not only their relationship with God, but also their relationships with us.

Because so much of Christianity is about fellowship, it's appropriate that the nuclear option for dealing with sin is the withdrawal of fellowship. They haven't listened to

the Scriptures or the appeals of their brethren, so now maybe the absence of those brethren from their lives will make them realize that they don't want to be absent from everybody in heaven. This will have no effect on people who have no close connections in the congregation, but the closer those connections are, the more painful it becomes.

The object here, though, is not merely to send people on a guilt trip. It's to restore them to fellowship, which means that a complete cessation of conduct is often not the wisest course. I'll have much more on this the next time I preach Sunday night, but for now, it's worth remembering Paul's instruction in 2 Thessalonians 3 not to regard such people as enemies, but to admonish them as brethren.

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