

OUR LIFE TOGETHER

LESSON NINE: LIFE TOGETHER - WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Church discipline. What comes to your mind as you read those words?

- * Men in black, assaulting quivering sinners with words and blows?
- * Pastors in the pulpit, revealing intimate details and railing against people?
- * Lawsuits filed by men and women who believe they were wronged and shamed by churches?

Because of these and other images, few churches practice church discipline. People usually resent it when they receive it. They grump. They leave. They sue. Why bother?

It's a good question, and only one answer is good enough: we believe in the exercise of church discipline, because God commands it.

WHAT IS CHURCH DISCIPLINE?

Here is one definition: *Church discipline is the exercise of authority given to the church by the Lord Jesus Christ.* Let's break that big sentence into three small parts:

1. IT IS *THE EXERCISE OF AUTHORITY*.

We believe the New Testament is clear about this: the leaders of the church have authority over those who have submitted themselves to that authority, by becoming members of the church.

What kind of authority is this? Can we gather three elders, two deacons and a thug and rough you up because we see you in a bar? Can we break into your house and drag you away from that television show? Can we close you in a room and force you to talk to us - or to the congregation?

No, no and no. Church authority is not police authority. We cannot *force* you to do or say anything.

Church authority is *spiritual* authority. The weapon we wield is outwardly weaker, but inwardly

stronger. We declare God's truth to people.

In Titus 2, Paul urges Titus to "teach what is in accord with sound doctrine," and to "encourage and rebuke with all authority." As spiritual leaders, we are called to encourage what is good, and to rebuke what is evil.

In Hebrews 13, the writer charges his readers to "obey your leaders and submit to their authority." As the spiritual leaders of the church offer God's truth, God's people should obey what they say and submit to this spiritual leadership.

2. IT IS THE EXERCISE OF AUTHORITY, *GIVEN TO THE CHURCH.*

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul is chastising the church for failing to exercise its authority over a man who is participating in a horrible sin.

We will discuss those details later, but for now, notice that authority is exercised not by one or two individuals, but by the church. The spiritual leaders of the church - the elders - exercise this authority.

Why? Because we are perfect? Because we are pure? No and no. As we learned in an earlier lesson, we exercise this authority because we have been prepared by God and called by God to do this. We are sinners. But God's Word is truth. Imperfect vessels, as a body, offer this.

3. IT IS THE EXERCISE OF AUTHORITY, *GIVEN TO THE CHURCH, BY THE LORD JESUS CHRIST.*

In Matthew 18, Jesus commands his followers to deal with sin - as individuals and, if necessary, as a body.

This both liberates and limits our authority.

* It *liberates* our authority, because we have God-given freedom to exercise it. We do not do it because we have created this authority for ourselves. We do it because God, in his Son, gave this

authority to us.

* But it also *limits* our authority, because we have God-given fences in exercising it. A fence defines the boundaries of something. God defines the boundaries of our authority.

This is important, because churches can and do err with church discipline, especially in one of two ways:

* We might try to compel obedience, instead of simply declaring the truth.

* We might try to command obedience, in areas that are not described in the Bible as sin.

Our challenge as leaders is to exercise our God-given authority, in a way that accords with the very truth we are trying to uphold!

WHERE IS CHURCH DISCIPLINE EXERCISED?

Here is a surprise. In a real sense, we exercise church discipline *in all the work of the church*.

Think about the word “discipline.” It is another form of the word “disciple.” As we learn in Jesus’ Great Commission in Matthew 28, the church is called to make and teach disciples.

Because of this, we can say that the preaching and teaching ministry of the church is “discipline.” It may be from the pulpit on Sunday morning. It may be in a Sunday School class or Life Group or Bible Study. It may be across a kitchen table.

When we offer God’s truth to you, we are disciplining you! We want you to become stronger disciples of Jesus Christ!

But when we talk about church discipline, we are usually talking about *judicial process*.

WHY DO WE HAVE JUDICIAL CHURCH DISCIPLINE?

Let’s return to 1 Corinthians 5, where Paul’s words to the Christians in Corinth capture all of our reasoning for this practice.

1. THE GLORY OF GOD.

What is the problem in Corinth? Paul says, *It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: a man has his father's wife.*

Because of the phrasing, we can safely say that this man is in a sexual relationship with his stepmother - who is still married to his father.

This is wrong before God, but as well, this is wrong before unbelievers. Even godless people know you should not do this. But this man is doing it, and the church is proud!

This is dishonoring to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. As Paul writes elsewhere to the Corinthians, believers are ambassadors of Jesus. We represent him before the world. We are called to reflect the glory of the holy God. This activity, and the church's toleration (and even approval) of this activity, smears the name of the glorious and holy God.

2. THE PURITY OF THE CHURCH.

Paul knows human nature. He knows that if this sexual immorality continues, others will feel free to find their own paths to sexual immorality. So he exhorts the Corinthians:

Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast - as you really are.

Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with the bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.

The "Festival" here may refer to the Lord's Supper - the ritual that confirms believers in their profession of Jesus as Savior from sin, and their expression of Jesus as Lord of life.

Paul seems to be saying, "You are ignoring (and even applauding?) this terrible sin. This one instance of corruption will lead to many more incidents of corruption. As this happens, more and more 'malice and wickedness' will prevail."

3. THE KEEPING AND RECLAIMING OF DISOBEDIENT SINNERS.

What does Paul want for this man? A one-way ticket to hell? No. He writes,

When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.

Paul is concerned for this man's eternal destiny! As he writes in the next chapter, people who live in unrelenting, unrepentant sin will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Paul seems to be saying, "Gather together and declare that this man is living a life that pleases Satan. Do this, so that he will repent, walk in a new path, and escape God's wrath."

We must see the heart of Jesus and Paul in the words of Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5! People may say, "Church discipline is not loving. If you love people, you will let them do what they want."

But we do not love people by ignoring their sin. That is the way of the world, not the way of the church. In the church, we love people by showing them how they are going astray.

When you see a little child running into the street, what do you say? "Oh, isn't it great to see him enjoying life?" No! You scream, "Stop! Don't go there! You are in mortal danger!"

In the same way, when we pursue church discipline, we are trying to stop the person from following a path that will lead to the destruction of his or her soul.

We long for repentance, reconciliation, and restoration. We are not giving them a one-way ticket to hell. We are calling them to turn back and grasp a one-way ticket to heaven.

WHEN DO WE EXERCISE JUDICIAL CHURCH DISCIPLINE?

Here is the problem: we cannot discipline for every sin. Who among us would stand? And how long would it take for the elders to collapse? When does a situation become an occasion for church discipline?

I have discovered good wisdom for this in a book called *Life in the Father's House*, by Wayne

Mack and David Swavely. They encourage elders to begin a process of church discipline for *any action, forbidden in Scripture, that cannot be overlooked*. Let's break this down...

1. ANY ACTION...

What were you thinking when you just looked at me? "He's a jerk"? "Will the Colts win today"? "Why do I have such bad gas"?

You get the point. We cannot prove attitudes. We can only observe actions.

A woman may say, "My husband has a bad attitude toward me." That may be so. But how do you really demonstrate that? At what point is that bad attitude so serious that he should receive a dose of church discipline?

If the woman says, "My husband hit me," that's a different story. We can prove this. Church discipline involves actions.

2. ANY ACTION, FORBIDDEN IN SCRIPTURE...

Is it wrong for a woman to wear makeup? Is it wrong to eat in a restaurant on Sunday? Is it wrong to send your children to the public schools?

Christians may differ on these questions. The Bible is not fully clear or does not fully address issues like this, so God may direct our consciences in various ways.

Is it wrong for a man to have sexual contact with a woman who is not his wife? Is it wrong for a worker to steal thousands of dollars from her employer? Is it wrong for a man to neglect and abuse his elderly parents?

Christians may not differ on these questions. The Bible is clear. The debate is over.

Church discipline must involve issues like those illustrated in the second set of questions. As elders, we have no right to nag or nitpick over less clear or less important issues. Again, we gain liberty from God to exercise discipline, but our liberty is limited by the very truth we are following.

3. ANY ACTION, FORBIDDEN IN SCRIPTURE, *THAT CANNOT BE OVERLOOKED.*

A wonderful verse for every day of our lives is Proverbs 19:11: "A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense."

When you overlook something, you make a decision to not "see" it. You will not bring it up. You will not brood about it. It was wrong, but it is over, as you offer grace.

But you cannot always do this. Sometimes you cannot overlook offenses - especially when...

* *The sin is public.* When everyone sees, something must be said.

* *The sin creates an unresolved problem between people.* Sin creates barriers between people, and some of those barriers are hard to overcome.

* *The sin really hurts someone.* Our sin always disturbs, distracts or disrupts others. But sometimes our sin devastates others.

* *The sin goes on and on, with no evidence of the fruit of repentance.* We all sin. But how do we respond to our sin? Do we turn from it, or do we return to it?

For the elders, this is a difficult judgment. In a broken world, problems are never neat and easy. We will always struggle with whether judicial discipline is appropriate.

WHAT IS THE BASIC PROCESS OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE?

In Matthew 18, Jesus provides a clear and simple path for this process:

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.

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

If he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or tax collector.

1. ONE-ON-ONE.

If someone sins against you, go to him or her. This is the ideal situation: private confrontation and private repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Too often, instead of going to the person who has sinned against us, we go to other people. We need to get out of this habit! If I have a problem with you, I need to speak to you, and to no one else.

2. IN A SMALL GROUP.

If the issue cannot be resolved privately, you bring more people into the situation. This should be people you respect and trust. Often, this is the Session.

3. TELL IT TO THE CHURCH.

If the issue cannot be resolved privately, or with the elders - through repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation - the church must be told.

There is such wisdom in this! While this process is simple, it provides the person with repeated opportunities to turn from sin and turn back to Jesus.

This is a patient but decisive process. Remember: the goal is not shame, but repentance, reconciliation, and restoration.

But how does this work on a Session and church level?

WHAT KINDS OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE CAN CHURCH MEMBERS FACE?

We are guided here by our Book of Church Order, which provides exhaustive (and exhausting) detail about the process of church discipline. If you read through it, you will find that many of the principles there are similar to American judicial principles.

1. ADMONITION.

The Book of Church Order defines it this way: “Admonition is the formal reproof of an offender by a church court, warning him of his guilt and danger, and exhorting him to be more circumspect and watchful in the future.”

Usually, this is done in person, followed by a letter. As elders, we say to the person, “We know what has happened. We want you to know that we are deeply concerned. We warn you that if such conduct continues, we may need to take further steps of discipline.”

2. *SUSPENSION FROM THE SACRAMENTS.*

Remember from earlier in this lesson, and from the lesson on the Lord’s Supper, that Paul is extremely concerned about how the Corinthians are handling the Lord’s Supper.

In 1 Corinthians 11:27, people are sinning against God and each other, then eating and drinking, as if nothing is wrong.

In Matthew 5, Jesus urges his listeners to pursue peace in relationships, even before worship.

In some cases, we will ask people not to participate in the Lord’s Supper until their situation has been resolved - through their repentance, reconciliation and restoration.

3. *EXCOMMUNICATION.*

According to the Book of Church Order, excommunication is the “excision of the offender from the communion of the church.” The leaders decide and declare that this person, because of the sin *and their refusal to repent of that sin*, is no longer part of the fellowship of the church.

This comes with the stern warning that echoes Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 5: “You are in danger. You must see the error of your ways, and turn from them. The consequences of your rebellion may be eternal.”

But remember: the goal is still repentance, reconciliation and restoration. We excommunicate as the ultimate “weapon” against the person - not to harm them, but to get their attention.

Under the principle of “tell it to the church,” the elders will tell the church when the process of excommunication is complete. Our past practice has been to do this through a letter sent to the members of the congregation.

WHAT ATTITUDE SHOULD GO WITH JUDICIAL CHURCH DISCIPLINE?

The elders hate church discipline! In no way do we relish it. Even as we do it, we wonder if we should be doing it, and if we are doing it right. Two attitudes should fill us as we do this:

1. *HUMILITY.*

Galatians 6:1: Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.

We are not sure whether the temptation here is the temptation to participate in the sin of the person who has been caught, or the temptation to sin in other ways as you deal with the person.

Either way, church discipline reminds the leaders of their own faults and their own sins. For example, if we are talking to a man about his marriage, we are made acutely aware of how we are men who sometimes fail miserably in our marriages.

We should be humbled. We should act humbly.

2. *LOVE.*

It is easy to miss one word in Jesus’ words in Matthew 18: “brother.” This person is our brother or sister in Jesus! Just as we care for “natural” family members, we are caring for “spiritual” family members. Will we be loving toward them, even if we must speak hard truths to them?

It is humbling, painful, time-consuming and exhausting. But we believe we are commanded to exercise this. If we must, we will. We must strive to please God - not people.

If God leads you to formalize our “life together” through church membership, one of your vows will be to submit to the government and discipline of the church. This means...

*** You will cooperate with the process of church discipline.**

*** You will support the leadership if it carries out church discipline.**

May God grant us grace to be faithful in this!