

The Discipline of the Church

July 15th, 2018

Matthew 18:15-20

Introduction

As Pastor Hatcher has been preaching expositively through 1 Corinthians, the elders thought it might be good to make a separate sermon out of the topic of church discipline. It is a topic that is not often taught, but it is in the founding documents of our church because it is taught in the Bible and is part of the whole counsel of God.

Jesus' words in Matthew 18 give us a step by step process to follow when the time comes where we may have been sinned against, or there is a situation that seems to call for some kind of correction. The life and health of a church are very dependent on the willingness of the body to hold each other accountable and to keep short accounts with sin. Our unity and fellowship are maintained when we as a body agree to faithfully follow this process confession, repentance, forgiveness, restoration in love and humility.

Notice that this is a topic of discipline, not of punishment. Discipline is what a father or mother does with their children where they are seeking the blessing and maturity of their children. Punishment is more concerned with justice and imposing something unpleasant that is commensurate with the severity of the crime. Discipline is a teaching time; punishment is a time of severity.

Often when people think of church discipline, they think of excommunication. But that would be like equating criminal law with the death penalty. There are many small acts of church discipline *before* ever getting to excommunication—just like all the remedies in our civil laws that are short of capital punishment. And note, the vast majority of informal church discipline is church gently reminding and encouraging one another. The more of the informal church discipline we have active in our churches, the far less formal discipline will ever be necessary.

Informal Discipline

- ◆ **Spiritual** - Paul tells us in Galatians 6 that those who are qualified to confront a brother are those who are spiritual, specifically, those who have examined themselves to ensure they are not in sin in the matter.
- ◆ **Significant** – One of the criteria to examine is the significance of the issue. Is it a matter that love could simply cover it and it would *actually be* covered and done away with (forgotten)? If it is significant enough to not forget, then you must be prepared to confront, assuming you can do so as a spiritual person.
- ◆ **Quiet** - Notice that those in the know about the situation are very limited—in Jesus' example, it would be just you and the brother/sister. You are to deal with it privately and bring the matter to the brother. Only if not received does the matter become slightly more public. Like expanding concentric rings, there is a process to these things.
- ◆ **Corroboration** – If we are not received by the brother, we are to get one or two more brothers and go back to him with the same humble demeanor.
- ◆ **Giving & Receiving** – These words of Jesus are given as commands; not some suggested tips on how to get along with each other. Either love covers and forgets, or love confronts. As a body, we need to be both people who know how to confront and how to be confronted. Both are done with prayer, humility, and care. We are called to be quick to confess and quick to grant forgiveness. In short, we are to forgive each other the way God forgives us.
- ◆ **Guard Our Hearts** – If the matter does not seem to rise to the level of importance, and love can cover it, we must be very careful to ensure that it is *actually* covered. If we find that it continues to bother us, and we tend to rehearse the details of the situation in our minds, then the sin has not truly been covered and you may be bitter. And this would disqualify you as the person to go to the brother.
- ◆ If the brother in sin does not receive the counsel of the 2 or 3 witnesses, then the matter is brought to the church for the elders to look into it. Even when the elders are looking into the matter, it still must remain quiet. While there are more in the know now, it still is not brought to the whole church until some judgment or determination is reached.

Formal Discipline

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

- ◆ Diligence must be exercised to establish as accurately as possible the facts of the matter by multiple lines of evidence. But there are times when the sin is already a very public, open matter and not as much effort is needed to establish the facts because the sin has already been admitted to by the offender.
- ◆ Notice that Paul instructs the Corinthians “not even to eat with such a person.” As this person is put out of the church, this man’s situation is somehow *worse than a non-believer*. We certainly would offer table fellowship to a person who was lost; with whom we hope to share the good news of the Gospel. But we are instructed not to eat with this man who calls himself a believer, refuses to repent from his high-handed sin, and has been put out. How could his situation be worse than a non-believer? I believe it is because his profession of faith and baptism have placed him in the New Covenant. But being a member of the New Covenant is not the same thing as being Elect. And just like every other covenant in the Bible, there are attendant blessings and curses—blessings for obedience to the covenant and curses for rebellion. You can’t be under the blessings or curses of a covenant that you are not a party to. I believe that there are additional (incremental) curses heaped upon this man because he has rebelled under the New Covenant.
- ◆ We are never told to be unkind or hide ourselves from somebody who has been put outside, but we also cannot pretend that things are all ok because—they aren’t. The church has removed their profession of faith and declared them to be an unbeliever. Don’t cross the street to avoid them, don’t scowl at them; go evangelize them.

Reasons for Discipline

- ◆ **To Obey and Glorify God** (Matt 5:16) – We see that God intends there to be church discipline (Matt 18:15-19, Rom 16:17, 1 Cor 5, 1 Thess 5:14, 2 Thess 3:6-15, 1 Tim 5:20, 6:3-5, Tit 1:13, 2:15, 3:10, Rev 2:2, 14-15, 20). We do not do it on our own authority, but submissive to the Word of God which is to His glory.
- ◆ **To Maintain the Purity of the Church** (1 Cor 5:6-9) – Sometimes the offender is not restored, but biblical discipline always contributes to the purifying of the church and prevents the profanation of the Lord’s Table (1 Cor 11:27). Biblical discipline provides the answer to the common objection of ‘hypocrites’ in the church.
- ◆ **To Restore the Offender** (1 Cor 5:5, Gal 6:1) – Restoration is not promised, but it is one of the purposes and, by God’s grace, can be the outcome. And so, like every other step of discipline, the goal of putting the offender out is to bring him back in, and the motivation is love. However, you cannot measure the effectiveness of church discipline by whether the person repents or not, you need to measure effectiveness by the first two reasons.
- ◆ **To Prevent God from His Discipline** (Rev 2:14-25) – If we put up with high-handed rebellion, and allow sin to abound, and refuse to discipline, then God will come and discipline us. A church refusing to exercise careful, loving church discipline is one who had no way of fighting off an “infection”.
- ◆ **To Deter Against Further Sin** (1 Tim 5:20, Eccl 8:11) – If you are struggling with sin (and we all are), open, faithful, loving discipline from those around you will prove to be a strong aid in your struggles.

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