

Week 3—Church Discipline Matthew 18:15-20

Welcome to week 3 of our Healthy Church series. For the past two weeks, we've talked about two very important characteristics of a healthy church: getting the gospel right and safeguarding regenerate church membership. This week we'll look at a third characteristic: practicing restorative church discipline.

Now, if you've never heard of restorative church discipline before, you're not alone.

Church discipline is a very clear teaching in Scripture, but in the last 100-150 years it has largely fallen out of practice in Baptist churches. I won't speculate about the causes of this today, but will only say that this is an utter tragedy. As we'll see today, abandoning church discipline does a disservice to the unrepentant sinner, it harms the purity of the church, and it blatantly disregards Christ's commands.

This morning my prayer is that as we look at what church discipline is in Scripture, we will come to the conclusion that it is actually the most loving, most beneficial, and most God-honoring thing a church can do when one of its members becomes caught in sin, and that we will all commit that we will be the kind of church that seeks to restore those who have fallen into sin through this process.

Turn with me in your Bibles this morning to Matthew 18. This morning we'll look at vv.15-18, but first, we should notice the context in which these verses are found. Vv. 15-18 come right on the heels of vv.12-14, which deals with the shepherd's concern for and pursuit of a straying sheep.

Matthew 18:12-14 "What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying? ¹³ "If it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray. ¹⁴ "So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish.

In context, then, we can see that church discipline is designed to do the same thing the shepherd does. He goes after the straying sheep because he loves it and wants to see it brought back into the fold. The goal of church discipline is restoration, that is, restoring the sinning brother to right fellowship with God and to the church.

We see this borne out in another important passage on church discipline, Gal. 6:1. Look at your handout, where I've printed the text for Gal. 6:1, as we make some observations from that passage:

Galatians 6:1 Brethren, 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.

First, notice the occasion for discipline: unrepentant sin. Here, Scripture calls this being "caught in any trespass." This doesn't mean we pursue church discipline for each instance of sin that any of us commits. There would be no end to our disciplining! We might spend all of our time each week just on my sin alone. It means that we pursue discipline for each instance of sin that a believer refuses to repent of. The person who is broken over his sin and has repented of it before God (and anyone he has hurt) is

NOT a candidate for church discipline. The person who refuses to repent of it IS the one Gal. 6:1 talks about. He is caught in a trespass.

Second, notice the goal of church discipline: restoration. Gal. 6:1 supports what we saw earlier in the example of the shepherd and the straying sheep in Matt. 18. Notice the words, “restore such a one.” The purpose of church discipline is not fundamentally to punish. It is to restore.

Third, notice the disposition of church discipline: “in a spirit of gentleness.” It’s not by looking down our noses at the person, or losing our temper with them. No, it is to be done as fellow sinners showing compassion and grace to another fellow sinner, as we humbly look to ourselves so that we too, are not tempted by sin. It is essential that discipline be done in this spirit. My recognition of my own sinfulness and propensity to sin keeps me from being haughty or condescending to someone else caught in sin. So, according to Gal. 6:1, the occasion for church discipline is unrepentant sin, the goal of church discipline is restoration, and the disposition of church discipline is to be a spirit of gentleness.

Now, let’s turn our attention back to Matt. 18. According to this passage, church discipline takes place in four stages. You can fill in the blanks on your handout as we go over them. Now, it’s important to note that if at any point in time, the sinning brother repents, the remaining stages are not carried out. This is because the goal is repentance and restoration, and when the goal is achieved, discipline ends – you’ve achieved what you set out to do.

v.15 ¹⁵ **“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.**

Step 1: the believer that becomes aware of his brother’s unrepentant sin does 2 things: go & show him his sin in private.

“**go**” – Notice here that we are called to take the initiative; we’re not to wait around for the sinner to repent or to come to us.

If you come home from work and find your friend’s house on fire and him trapped inside, the kindest thing you can do is not to stand at the curb and root for him to make it out on his own. It’s to go in after him, in an attempt to rescue him. Some people might object that you have no business doing this. After all, it’s not your house, and you’d be intruding and meddling to go inside. But if you don’t go in after him, what does that say about the kind of friend you are? The most loving thing you can do is go to him and attempt to rescue him from the flames. In the same way, Scripture tells us that we cannot stand by the curb, so to speak, while others are caught in the burning house of sin. We need to go to them and try to restore them from it. Some people may call this meddling; Jesus would call it loving them.

“**show him his fault**” – This means that we are to reprove him, call him to account, show him where he has violated Scripture. This does not tell us to scold, browbeat, or verbally abuse the sinning brother, but to plead with him to repent and be restored. Remember, this must be done in a spirit of gentleness.

“**in private**” – lit. “between you and him alone.” The matter is not to be gossiped about or spread around for others to know.

Tragically, gossip is what takes place in so many churches in America today. A person is sinned against or learns of someone else’s sin, and rather than loving the offender

enough to confront him/her privately, he goes to someone else to gossip about that person's sin. Shame on church members who conduct themselves in this way, and shame on the churches that don't love their members enough to discipline them biblically. We must obey the command to first approach the sinning brother "in private."

This plea can result in one of two outcomes:

"if he listens to you," – "listening" means not just the act of hearing, but agreeing that the reproof you received was scriptural and right and repenting, or turning from, the sin. If the offender repents, the whole process is over.

In that case, **"you have won your brother."** – This shows the redemptive and restorative goal of church discipline again; it's to win him back.

However, a second scenario is possible.

v.16 ¹⁶ **"But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED.**

"if he does not listen" – that is, refuses to heed, is unwilling to change, disregards your pleas

Jesus is warning us that the sinning brother may not repent. If that's the case, the original confronter is not to give up. Instead, he is to take with him one or two more witnesses to confront the sinning brother and plead with him to repent. This constitutes Step 2: take one or two more with you.

Now, let's be honest: At this point, the easiest, most comfortable thing to do is to give up, isn't it? I mean, things would just get more messy if you bring more people into this, and your friend will be really mad if you come back with other people to revisit this uncomfortable topic. But you remember what we said last week? We don't do church with the goal that we might be made more comfortable. God did not give us His commands and ask us to choose the ones we feel comfortable obeying. Instead, we practice church for the purpose of glorifying God, and we glorify Him when we obey His commands—all of them—even when it's hard. Obedience is costly, but there is no option in which you can follow Jesus and it not be costly. That is not called Christianity. If you signed on for salvation without denying yourself and taking up your cross to follow Christ, what you signed on for was not salvation.

So, we see that the next step is for us to take one or two more people with us. But why does Jesus tell us to do that? Look again at v.16:

"so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED/established" – Jesus is quoting from Deut. 19:15, which deals with witnesses to a sin that has been committed. In that passage, multiple witnesses were required to confirm one another's report that the sin had taken place, to corroborate one another's testimony. The same thing is in view here. A single person might be wrong in his accusation, but this is much less likely with 2-3 people.

They might accompany the original witness to the sinning brother's house and sit down on his couch, and the original witness might say, "Brother, we care about you. And the sin in your life is serious; it's like a cancerous tumor that's eating you up. When I spoke with you before, you said that you didn't want to repent of it, but I'm here today with these two other brothers to plead with you once more to repent of your

sin.” If the sinning man again refuses to repent, these other witnesses will now be able to give confirming testimony to the original witness’s account when the discipline process proceeds to Step 3.

They also do something more. Look ahead to v.17 briefly: The fact that the sinning brother may “**refuse to listen to them**” shows that these others that come along are not merely witnesses and observers, but also pleaders with the sinning brother to repent.

Again, the small number (1-2 others + the original confronter) is designed to keep the matter as quiet as possible.

Sometimes, the shame of being confronted by others whom you love and respect in Step 2 is enough to motivate a person to repentance. Unfortunately, that’s not always the case, as v.17 shows us:

v.17 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.**

The sinning brother may refuse to listen to the pleadings of the group that is now 2 or 3 in number. If that’s the case, notice that the brother who originally confronted the unrepentant person does not give up. He continues to pursue restoration by telling the church body. This is Step 3: tell it to the church.

Why would he do that? Is it so that he can broadcast some juicy gossip for everyone to go home and talk about at Sunday lunch? Is it to get back at the unrepentant person for failing to heed his counsel? No, instead, he tells the church so that they too can plead with him to repent and be restored. This is evident from the next statement in v.17: **“if he refuses to listen even to the church”**

The church is not simply to sit idly by with the new information that one of its own has fallen into sin. Neither is the church simply to pass judgment and excommunicate the person on the spot once they receive this report. Instead of either of those extremes, here is what Scripture tells the members to do: they are to go after the wayward brother, lovingly begging him to come to his senses and repent of his sin and avoid its destructive consequences. The offender must hear the church. And this, too, is to be done in a spirit of gentleness and humility.

And folks, let me be a little blunt with some of you this morning: If you think your duties of church membership don’t extend past your filling up a pew seat every Sunday, you’re mistaken. If you think you can fulfill what Christ commands of you here in v.17 and never pursue a wayward fellow church member, you’ve tragically misunderstood membership. Membership involves a commitment to watch over one another as fellow members. It involves a commitment to go to the wayward member and beg him to repent. Anything less is a breach of your duty and amounts to you standing on the curb watching someone else burn to death inside a flaming house.

You may say, I just don’t know that person well enough to speak to him in that way. I’ve never had much of a conversation with him, and certainly church discipline seems like a poor place to start. In response, I would simply ask you, “Why in the world have you never gotten to know that person and built a relationship with him?” In churches as small as ours, there is no excuse for everyone not knowing everyone else. One purpose for our fellowship events, for our cantatas, for our church softball teams,

for our men's and women's retreats, is to build the kind of deep relationships where we can unashamedly speak truth into one another's life.

And being a member of a church that practices restorative church discipline is a benefit to you. Why is that? It's because we still struggle with sin, as people with remaining sin who are being progressively sanctified. It's because we need other Christians to watch over us because our own hearts are desperately wicked and can deceive us. It's because we need to be encouraged day after day so that none of us will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. It's because, as the hymnwriter said, we are still prone to wander, prone to leave the God we love. This kind of membership commitment recognizes all of these things, and should give us comfort to know that we are part of a church body that cares about our holiness, wants to help us fight sin, and will hold us accountable to Scripture's standards.

Now, think about what it would be like to have an entire church full of people that you know and love pleading with you to repent. The church can be a powerful force in a person's life. Sin clouds our judgment and our perception when we are caught in it. But the loving voice of one's entire church family can be just the means God uses to help us see our sin for what it is, to bring us to the point of godly sorrow, and to bring us back to Him in repentance.

Personally, one of the things I am most grateful for is a church family that loves me enough to come after me if I am straying. I love it that they love me enough not to watch from the curb while my house burns down on me. They love me enough to go after me. You see, if we can get it out of our minds that discipline is a mean-spirited, intrusive thing and begin to realize that it is one of God's greatest graces toward us, we will come to love deeply the kind of church that will watch over us, and if necessary, discipline us, so that we will continue to walk with the Lord.

But what if the sinning brother still refuses to repent?

“if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” – IOW, consider him as a lost person.

This command constitutes the fourth step in church discipline. The church is to regard the person as an unbeliever, and because it retains as members only those who give evidence of being born again (RCM!), it is to release, or excommunicate, him from fellowship. Step 4 is to remove him from membership, and again, this is because by failing to repent, he gives no evidence of being born again.

We saw this last week also in 1 Corinthians 5. This morning we don't have time to read that chapter and mine its contents about church discipline, but I would encourage you to do that at home, especially if the concept of church discipline is new to you.

Paul tells us a bit more in that context about what removing someone from membership entails. He tells us that we are not to even eat with a person who is under church discipline. We are to disfellowship him, lest we communicate through our table fellowship that there is no breach in fellowship between him and God. We represent to him God's countenance on the matter, and our withdrawing fellowship depicts the barrier of unconfessed sin that remains between him and God. Another implication of not eating with this person is that he is also forbidden from partaking of the Lord's Supper, which celebrates the unity of the church's members, a thing he cannot share in while under discipline.

However, although this person is no longer a member, he is, like any lost person, welcome to attend our services and hear the word of God preached. And though we are not to fellowship with him, that does not mean that our pleas for repentance must end. We should continue to mirror the offer of forgiveness that God extends to him.

V. 18 teaches us that the church is God's means of declaring to the sinning brother where he stands with God. Often, when we are in rebellion against God, it is easy to push Him from our consciousness – “out of sight, out of mind.” But the church makes visible and tangible God's disposition toward the person in sin.

v.18 ¹⁸ **“Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.**

Here, **binding** = declaring someone bound in sin; **loosing** = declaring them loosed, or forgiven, of their sin. The church declares by its action in church discipline what God has already decided in heaven. What the church is saying, God has already said. This is a strong statement that the very authority of God Himself is behind church discipline.

So, we see that Jesus has given the church the authority to declare someone forgiven or unforgiven. It's important for us to note that the church does not determine whether they are forgiven; it simply declares it.

A good translation of v.18 will help us in this regard. Unfortunately, only NASB translates the verbs most accurately. The translation that many of us have, “whatever you bind...shall be bound in heaven” gives the idea that the church initiates the action and God responds. In other words, it would seem that we get to determine the policies of heaven. However, correctly translated, the sentence says, “whatever you bind...shall have been bound in heaven.” God, not the church, initiates the binding and loosing. The church is simply His instrument to display this to the sinning person. God gives the church to the sinning brother for his benefit, not only to mirror God's attitude toward his rebellion, but when he repents, to mirror God's gracious forgiveness. Notice that the church also has an important obligation to declare someone loosed, or forgiven, from their sin. The disciplined member who repents may still struggle with feelings of guilt and difficulty believing in God's promise of forgiveness. To this end, God has given the church, that we might reassure him of God's forgiveness. 2 Cor. 2:6-8 is printed on your handout. You can read along with me:

2 Corinthians 2:6-8 Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority, ⁷ so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him, otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him.

The church is to wrap its arms around the now-repentant brother and welcome him back as a member of the family. In the case of a repentant brother, forgiveness and restoration are not optional for the church; they are commanded by Christ. And if you ever have a chance to witness this take place, you will say that it is one of the most beautiful sights in the world to behold.

So, in conclusion, restorative church discipline may not be an easy command to obey, but the church that wants to be faithful to its risen Lord will do it. At stake if we fail

to practice church discipline are dire consequences: 1.) The entire church is leavened by the leaven of sin and becomes dull to its deadly, evil nature. The purity of Christ's bride is compromised. 2.) The brother in sin is not pursued by his church and is left to destroy himself and others by his sin. 3.) And worst of all, Christ and His commands are blatantly dishonored.

19th-century Southern Baptist theologian John L. Dagg had it right when he said about church discipline, "It has been remarked, that that when discipline leaves a church, Christ goes out with it." May this never be said of us.

Respond: So, today, I'm calling you to something that is somewhat radical in our day and age: Commit to obeying God's word as a church member even when it's unpleasant. Commit to loving the purity of Christ's church and striving to maintain it. Commit that you will be the kind of member who pursues and restores wayward members of your church family. Commit to building the kind of relationships with others that would allow you to speak the truth in love to them.

And speaking of love, love that you are a part of a church that loves you enough to come after you if you head off into unrepentant sin. Love me and others enough to come after us if we fall into sin. And insist, now that you've seen that church discipline is commanded in Scripture, that it will serve as a non-negotiable part of the foundation for a new church if our churches merge. When we stand before Christ one day to give an account, what will we say? Will we say that we were faithful to Christ's command to restore through discipline? Or will we tell him that His command simply wasn't worth obeying?