



# CHURCH ESSENTIALS

## Introduction

Today we are considering Church Discipline. After saying that, what did you think or feel? Some of you may already be turning to Matthew 18 and, indeed, you would be correct – this is the premium go-to passage for church discipline. If you are being honest with me your heart may have sunk just a little bit. It isn't generally warmly received. You may have bristled a bit because you have seen discipline handled poorly within the church. That said, I hope we see church discipline after this morning with a greater perspective and a greater appreciation. To do so I want to focus not just on the "how" of discipline, but also on the "why" of discipline.

I also wish to look at verses 15-17 in the broader context of Matthew 18. Matthew 18 is a wonderful chapter. Do you have a red-letter edition of the bible? If you do you see that almost the whole chapter is red. It is a precious discourse of Christ, wherein we find many of the master teacher's teaching tools. It starts with a question posed to Jesus: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He brilliantly responds by bringing a child into their midst – the object lesson. He uses metaphor and analogy. We see him using hyperbole in the section on the dangers of sin and causing others to sin. Then he tells two parables: the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the unforgiving servant. It is between these parables that we find the more prescriptive teaching on church discipline.

## Read Matthew 18

### (1) Why do we discipline?

This is a good question. It certainly goes against the grain of our culture. We generally do not like confrontation do we. We do not like confronting or being confronted. When we are it can make us feel quite small. Have you ever been confronted; especially publicly? Think, perhaps, of a school situation – didn't you slink in your seat reflecting that feeling of being small. And yet small, says Jesus, is just the right size to get *into* the kingdom or move *up* in the kingdom.

#### i) For the value of one straying sheep

Have you ever misplaced a child? Our Florida example. Nothing gets the adrenaline going like a lost child. Note we go from the parable of the lost sheep to dealing with a lost brother. What do we see in this parable?

- about the "little ones" – children in that society were of little rank, they were among the marginalized (not that they were never seen as a blessing of the Lord, but they were of no authority or consequence to adults)
- but we see these little ones have the attention of the Father
- comparison to a shepherd – the kind of good shepherd who would leave the 99 to find and rescue the one who went astray
- what happens when he finds it?
  - he rejoices!
- this is equated to the will of the Father in heaven

Doesn't this immediately enhance how we look at the wayward brother needing discipline in v15? Jesus moves from a parable showing how our Father in heaven values all, but in particular Church Discipline – Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Tim 4:7

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the strayed sheep. It is not unlike the father who rejoices over the return of the prodigal son, rejoicing because that which was lost is now found. So, we keep this in mind as we read vv15-17. The Father's concern for sinners, and the Shepherd's seeking and rescuing of them, is now pitched as the church's concern. We confront and discipline because every believer has value, perhaps especially the stray ones.

### ii) For the hope of repentance and reconciliation

Again, we see this in the context of the following parable that I did not read. In vv 15,21, and 35 we read the word "brother". Brother is a generic term for Christian; it can refer to a man or woman. But it is interesting that Jesus uses brother rather than disciple or member etc. Brother has the added implication of family. There is a presumed relationship, or at least a hoped-for relationship when we say "brother".

Back to the prodigal son, when he returned, how was he greeted? It wasn't with "I told you so" or "Have you learned your lesson?" or passive-aggressive silence. No, the father was waiting and longing for him. From afar off the returning son was seen. The father ran to him, embraced him, kissed him, forgave him ... and threw a massive party for him. The father was full of joy; rejoicing was the natural thing to do!

So, as a body of believers, the church confronts because it longs for the wayward. It longs to put the forgiveness of Christ on display, in a way to celebrate the forgiving of our brother who had sinned against his "family".

### iii) For the sake of the Church

What do we learn from vv7-9? The dangers of temptations and sin. We see that even after his first coming sin is still with us (v7). Until we reach eternity, sin is a reality of life. But Jesus calls on mature and maturing Christians to cut sin off – to not be the ones through whom temptation comes. You do not have to be an elder to be a leader. In fact, it is quite likely that somebody is watching you – somebody is influenced by you. When we guard our own hearts and lives we are naturally guarding others as well. Jesus doesn't use the picture of leaven here, but it is like the warning that a little leaven leavens the whole dough. When we are careful to walk in and with the Lord such that we do not encourage temptation, we help keep the purity of the church and we check the spread of sin.

Explain the different senses of "through whom the temptation comes". This can be direct or indirect. If you gossip, for example, that is a direct temptation to others to follow. If you allow gossip, that is, turn a blind eye to it, you are no less a conduit through which the temptation to gossip may come.

And so we confront for the sake of purifying the church.

### iv) To obey the command of Christ

This is what Christians do. This is the oft-forgotten part of the great commission: "teaching them to observe all that he has commanded (Mt 28:20a)"

What do we observe (that is to say "do" or "obey") when the values of our world conflict with the values Jesus has clearly taught? Whether it is our attitude toward money, divorce, submission to authority, sexual ethics, serving others rather than self; any number of ways following Jesus is counter-cultural, which way will we go? Jesus cannot be more clear with respect to

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confrontation. We follow him not only because he is Lord, but because he is our loving Lord. There is no contradiction here. Perhaps Jesus had in mind Leviticus 19:

“You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with him, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a single grudge against ...[him], but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.”

From the Lord's perspective there is no contradiction within loving someone and correcting someone. He is the loving shepherd who goes after the wayward sheep. As the church we are to never have the attitude of indifference “oh, what difference does one lost sheep make, we have 99 others” or lenience “whatever, sheep will be sheep”.

## (2) How do we discipline?

### i) We “go” (v15)

Think of all the ways we do not follow this command.

- we sulk silently
- we tell somebody else – maybe then it will come around to the sinning brother
- withdraw until the offender guesses that you are offended

Jesus tells us to take responsibility and go to our brother, not wait for them to come to you.

### ii) Who goes? The one sinned against

“If your brother sins against *you*”. This is not an invitation to go on a fault-finding mission throughout the church, taking a flashlight to every dark corner you can find. Primarily, leaders are responsible for the general care and concern for sin and restoration, but we are all responsible to act when someone sins against us.

### iii) Tell him his fault (v15)

- reprove
    - implies “investigation”
    - think “line of inquiry rather than inquisition!”
  - the attitude is not “gotcha’
  - asking questions allows the brother to reflect and perhaps clarify
  - for example: “It seems to me that you did (or said) ... am I right?”; or “Can you explain what happened when?”
- Isn't this what God himself did with Adam and Eve? “Where are you?” “Who told you you are naked?” “Have you eaten from the tree?”

Asking questions helps reestablish (or acknowledge) relationship. It also shows respect and dignity to our brother for we are assuming he has something to say. We approach with gentleness as Paul instructs (Gal 6:1) remembering our own sin, lest we also be overtaken.

### iv) We go privately (v15)

- insofar as we are able (there are exceptions as with minors/adults)
- Peter/Paul exception
- a private conversation allows the greatest space for conversation and respectful dialogue. Public confrontation will likely put the offending brother on the defensive (guilty or not). It brings unwanted and unnecessary shame. Remember, the goal is to win your brother not the fight. The best way to do that is through private conversation.

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## v) We go to gain (v15)

This is the aim of the good Shepherd, and it is the aim of the church. We want our brother restored. Our hope is that he hears, acknowledges, repents, and restores.

Be a safe place for sinners, and unsafe place for sin!

## vi) We go to forgive

-following parable

-the expectation of the presence of sin amongst Christians

## What if he doesn't listen? (v16)

-one or two witnesses

## Continued impenitence (v17)

-taken to the church

Throughout, the goal is restoration, not punishment.