

Would Jesus Practice Church Discipline?

Matthew 18:15-20

Joe Bartemus

"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 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. 18 Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. 19 Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

Introduction:

Today is September 12, 2010. A day like any other and fairly innocent. One day earlier on the calendar in 2001, a day was experienced that was unlike any other. It became well known with the "simple" label of 9/11. Do you remember where you were when the events of that day occurred? I was here at the church building and was called to the television to observe a bizarre clip of an airplane and the World Trade Center. No one knew exactly what was happening, but eventually the unthinkable was true—America was under attack. Here are a few observations that came out of these events that will set the stage for our text today:

1. Freedoms restricted—We are a country given to freedom. When we were threatened we gave up our freedoms and submitted to rigorous passenger searches for air flight, we shut down airlines and public transportation, and we appreciated strict security scrutiny to protect our lives. Freedom was conceded for safety.
2. Individuality and privacy was secondary—We saw people acting more like a community than like individuals. People were helping others, the American flag was a symbol of solidarity—we needed and wanted each other. Let's work at this together. We need each other.
3. Purity—We wanted to find the offenders and have them brought to justice, and we wanted to put in systems that would prohibit this from happening ever again.
4. No expense is too much—Compared to losing our lives, we as Americans were willing to spend much to protect ourselves and our country and our freedoms
Bottom line, we were at WAR!!! , and it was not pretty or trivial. In the world of God's kingdom, there is a battle as well. We are in a spiritual battle. Christ has given his marching orders and promises that the very "gates of hades" will not prevail against his church. This

morning we want to look at the controversial topic of church discipline. Like it or not, it is a very important part of Christ's kingdom and the divine strategy to protect and build his church. We want to look at Matthew 18:15-20 and see **3 Strategies of Christ's plan for protecting the purity of his church and his people.**

I. Strategy #1: The plan for purity—Matthew 18:15-20

In this most interesting passage, Jesus describes a 4 part plan to preserve purity in his church. Before we review those points, it will be helpful to notice the context (always a good plan for studying the Bible). Please observe 3 context passages. 1) On several occasions, Jesus admonished his followers to take heed to themselves and to practice self discipline. A clear example of this is in Matt. 18:7ff. He makes the notorious statement that "if your hand offends you—cut it off." That is radical self-discipline, but if we were faithful in our self-discipline, then the need for church discipline would be non-existent. 2) There is a call by a parable (Matt. 18:10-14) to go after the 1 from the flock of 100 because we love each other and do not desire any to fall away. 3) After the discussion of church discipline in vss. 15-20, Jesus tells a stirring story of forgiveness that includes the statement to forgive 70X7 times. So, the context is very full of acts of grace and mercy. That is the background of church discipline—not anger and revenge.

Now to the text of Matthew 18:15ff. You can see the diagram of the 4 steps (including the preventive step of self discipline—diagram from Jay Adams, [Handbook of Church Discipline](#)). Let me briefly review these steps:

Step #1—"If your brother sins go and tell him his fault." The insertion of "against you" may not be in the original text. Often the sin will be against you, but there are times when the sin may not be personal to you. One of the key words repeated at least 4 times (in each step) is "listen." "If he listens" means if he repents and accepts the rebuke and turns from his sin. When that happens, you have won a brother—what a great prize. The issue is over and fellowship is renewed. That should be a most common practice in the church. Brothers and sisters must be courageous to confront each other when there is unquestionable sin. This is not for matters of opinion or liberty, but true sin such as mentioned in the 10 commandments of our unchanging, holy God. I just recently heard of a family who had a relative who was going to leave his spouse for a younger woman and claimed to be a Christian. There are many details in this story, but in the end, this couple was courageous to confront this family member in a loving but direct way. It was great to see that boldness and love that went the extra, hard mile. The outcome is yet to be seen, but God is honored with their love.

Step #2—"BUT—if he does not listen, take one or two witnesses..." The word "BUT" is important—is there any doubt of that?? The first step should be effective most of the time. The second step is necessary if he does not listen (or repent). The trigger to move from one step to another is not how horrible the sin was (Jesus forgives very horrible sin), but the trigger

is the failure to listen and repent. When that happens, the person confronting must take others to confirm what will be said and to confirm that the person is really resistant and unrepentant. I have seen this happen often and it is difficult. People do not like to be confronted, and they do not like to have others involved in the confrontation. Hebrews 12:11 says that “for the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant.” Good parents understand this, but good parents would never think of avoiding discipline because of the fruit of it.

Step #3—“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church...” The next step, again, opens the level of exposure. Now the sinner is brought to the church for prayer and exhortation to repent. There is still hope. Embarrassment is not the goal at all—repentance is the goal. The point of this step is for the prayers and encouragement of the saints to be used by the Holy Spirit to draw an erring brother back to the fold of the redeemed. For those of us in our “sanctified minds,” to have the community praying for us would be wonderful. What power there is in the prayer of the saints.

Step #4—“If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and tax collector.” This step is sobering and frightful. It says that the church has concluded that the actions of the person are more consistent with an unbeliever than a believer. God only knows who are his, but the sinner’s actions give evidence of lack of faith in Christ, and removal is necessary for the purity of the church of Jesus. This possible step should cause us all to strive to live in a way that honors our Lord and we should keep a short account of our sin—be quick to repent—or judgment will come!!!

The steps mentioned are clear. A lot more could be said. Here are some other New Testament verses that can help you to get a fuller view of the whole aspect of church discipline (I Cor. 5:1-12; I Cor. 11:27; II Cor. 2:1-11; Gal. 6:1-2; II Thess. 3:14-15; I Tim. 1:20; I Tim. 5:19-21; Titus 3:10; James 5:19; I John 5:16; II John 10-11).

Two contrasting illustrations come to my mind as I think of church discipline. First, I have recently been reading a good book on church membership and discipline called The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love, by Jonathan Leeman. I wrote a review of it that you can read on the THINK|online webpage at www.yourchurch.com. He recalls the book Scarlet Letter and how the New England community shunned the woman who was immoral and did not expose the baby’s father to the community. Some of the old naggy women would say things derogatory toward her suggesting that they were so morally superior, that she should not be in their presence and probably should move or die. The reader has the tendency to support the adulteress and to be against the religious self-righteous community. As you read the book your inclination is to argue for tolerance and that we are all ok and should not be judgmental. In contrast to that are events in the life of John Piper (He has been great help in the faith for me). His son was rebellious, and his church had to take the action of discipline against him though he was the pastor’s son. God was gracious and brought the erring son back, but the process

was tough – full of tough love. God grant us the courage as a church to be willing to be continually involved in these steps of love toward each other.

Here are some “take-aways” from these verses (and items I want to mention but do not know where else to say them)

- 1) We must practice church discipline for the glory of our holy God
- 2) We must strive to keep the bride of Christ pure—Christ’s church is bigger than any one of us.
- 3) We must seek justice for the oppressed
- 4) The purity of the church is not merely in the sexual area—all sin is abhorrent to God
- 5) We must do the loving act to the sinner—tell them of their sin
- 6) The process must be slow and full of grace—BUT it must happen.
- 7) The ultimate goal is RESTORATION, not retribution or punishment.
- 8) We can avoid much of this if we practice self-discipline regularly.

II. Strategy #2: The authority behind discipline for purity—Matthew 18:18

This verse is a virtual repeat of Matthew 16:19 where Jesus speaks of giving to Peter the keys of the kingdom. In this passage, Jesus gives the authority to all the apostles, and that could extend to church leaders. He says that “whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven.” I mentioned before in Matthew 16 that the better translation would be “whatever you bind on earth will **have been bound** in heaven. The idea is for the church to bind and loose what has already been bound or loosed in heaven. The leaders have no binding power themselves but are to be wise and see what the will of God is and to do the same thing. This verse is very sobering. It tells us that heaven is interested in church discipline. The reality is that if one refuses to repent and listen to the counsel of the church as they understand it from God, the removal from fellowship is a reflection of the lack of fellowship in heaven. Elsewhere, this idea is that discipline is giving over the person to Satan with the hope that his soul may be saved (I Cor. 5:5). There is something real about the covering of the church for believers. I remember when my sister, who is a little older than me, had a time of rebellion against my parents. She wanted to do something different than what my dad wanted her to do. He finally said that she could do it and he was not responsible (that was not like him). She told me later (after we both were more mature) that she was scared to death when he said that (she did not tell him). She was afraid what it would be like to stand alone without his covering. So it is with the church. Being under the discipline of the church is the last place you want to be—other than being under the discipline of God (and both may be the same).

III. Strategy #3: The Power of Purity—Matthew 18:19-20

The last 2 verses are real power verses. Some may think the discipline verses are evidence of a power move by the church. The reality is that when the church, or parts of the church, are on their knees, that is the true power of the church. That is where the power of God can be unleashed. In verse 19 Jesus says that “if 2 or 3 of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them.” What a strong and inclusive promise. It cannot be a license to

get God to be the genie in the bottle to grant every wish. In this context it is probably referring to people gathering to pray for one to repent of sin. The principle of prayer is always for the coming of God's will. So power in prayer is prayer that petitions God to do his will, and in this case the prayer is that his will could be to grant repentance. There is nothing more kind and powerful than praying with another 2 or 3 people regarding a person in sin. That is the antidote for gossip—prayer. I know of several parents in our church who regularly get together as couples and pray for their kids. What a wonderful application of Matt. 18:19. Get on your knees for your kids, spouses, extended family, work, church etc.

Here is another place in Scripture where being in community is crucial. At CPC we are committed to spurring all attendees to connect—first in membership, then in smaller groups such as ABF classes, small groups, and other ministry opportunities. Church is not a game. The church is the bride of Christ. Do you think marriage is a game? There can be no excuse for just attending a service and not being committed to community at church. It is one of the ways that Jesus is bringing to himself his pure bride. You cannot do it alone. Even with Jesus, he calls you to fellowship and communion with the saints (that is the true definition of the church).

Verse 20 caps the discussion. Jesus promises to be with us. He puts it in terms of community. When we are gathered in groups 2 or 3 or 3,000, he is in the midst of us. That can be good or bad. We are glad he is there, but he will not share his glory with anyone else and he is committed to fellowship with those of pure hearts. Thank God he is with us and thank God he has a plan for our purity. Let's get on board.

Conclusion:

We have looked at church discipline from God's Word. We have no choice but to obey. It is for our good and his glory. It has been said that the acts that distinguish a church are 1) preaching the Word; 2) practicing ordinances/sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and 3) practicing church discipline. I think that is right. Today we observed the Lord's Table. In I Cor. 11:28 Paul says "let a person examine himself, then, and so let him eat... for anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself." What a sobering verse for today.

How about you? Are you examining yourself? Am I? We have a monthly time to reflect on the one reality that can cleanse us from our sin—the blood of Jesus. God's blood is available for repentant sinners, not for the rebellious who do not listen. Do not be one who takes the Lord's Supper without accessing the cleansing power of the blood. It is not good for your soul, it is not good for Christ's church, and it can cause the name of Jesus to be maligned in the world.