

# An Overview of Church Discipline

## Intro.

A. The secular philosopher Allan Bloom argued in his 1987 best-seller, *The Closing of the American Mind*, that tolerance, built on the assumption of moral relativism, not truth, has become the chief “virtue” in America. To judge any behavior or philosophy as evil is unthinkable” (67). Bloom found that many of his students were hesitant to label even Hitler as evil.

B. I am afraid that the prevailing cultural “virtue” of tolerance has infiltrated the church. We have bought into the idea that to judge any behavior as sin is to “throw the first stone.” It’s perceived as unloving and so churches either accept or overlook gross violations of biblical standards, and serious sin. If we are not willing to judge behaviors as sinful, is it any surprise that church discipline has almost become a thing of the past? Think of it, even if you’ve been in the church for years, chances are that you’ve never seen a church discipline a sinning member.

C. For the church this mindset of “tolerance” is something that we cannot embrace! It is ungodly, unscriptural, & one of the most unloving mindsets that we can have. I freely admit that practicing church discipline is neither easy nor pleasant. But the Bible, not our culture, must be our standard for faith and practice and it clearly teaches the importance of church discipline. So today as a reminder, I want to give a brief overview of biblical church discipline.

## I. The Purposes for Church Discipline:

A. If I am going to do something, I always like to know why I am doing it. Sometimes it drives my wife crazy, but for me understanding the “why” behind the action is an important part of the process for me because is the basis for my motivation. So if you want me to do something, especially if it is not easy or it might even be painful, I am really going to need to understand the “why” of what I am doing.

B. For something as important as church discipline I feel that it is vital that we understand the “why” very well. So I want to spend some time establishing purpose for church discipline. Open your bibles to 1 Cor. 5. As we go through this text we see that the purpose of church discipline is really four-fold.

1. **1 Cor. 5:1-2.** The first purpose of church discipline is that it vindicates God’s honor & holiness publicly. This is one aspect of church discipline that is not often taught on or talked about much but God’s holiness is a dominant theme in the Bible.

a. In the Old Testament, God told His people (Lev. 19:2), “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” The New Testament repeats that

# An Overview of Church Discipline

command (1 Pet. 1:15-16). Peter refers to the church as a holy priesthood and a holy nation (1 Pet. 2:5, 9).

b. Because God's name is bound up with His church, when His people sin, church discipline is the method He has set up to disassociate Himself from them if they do not repent of their sin.

2. **1 Cor. 5:3-5.** The second purpose of church discipline is that it conveys biblical love and seeks to restore the sinner.

a. **James 5:19-20.** Love seeks to turn a sinner from his sin.

b. **Galatians 6:1-4.** "Looking to yourself" implies that you, too, could fall into sin. So, don't be self-righteous or condescending.

c. Some wrongly think that love is opposed to discipline. But the Bible is clear that because God loves us, He disciplines us so that we may share His holiness (**Heb. 12:6, 10**). Sin always destroys people and relationships. So to be indifferent toward a sinning brother or sister is to hate, not love, that person. The goal in church discipline is never vindictive. We are not trying to punish people or to throw them out of the church. Our aim is to restore the offender.

3. **1 Cor. 5:6-8.** The third purpose of church discipline is that it restores purity to the church body and deters others from sinning.

a. Paul gives an illustration here. If you put a small amount of yeast in flour, it spreads through the entire lump. Paul is saying that the church needed to remove the sinning man so that the purity of the church would be restored and the sin would not spread any further.

b. You can see this idea in a family. If the parents do not discipline a defiant child, soon the other children learn that there are no consequences if they disobey their parents. The sin of the first child spreads to the others.

c. In the local church, God has given authority to the elders (**Heb. 13:17**). Part of their responsibility is to uphold God's standards of holiness and do all that they can to keep the church doctrinally and morally pure. They do this in a loving way acting as shepherds of the souls of the flock.

d. Sin in other professing Christians should cause us to mourn, not to be tolerant. God would rather that a local church be pure and small than that it be big, but tolerant of sin (**Rev. 2-3**).

4. **1 Cor. 5:9-13.** The fourth purpose of church discipline is that it displays God's standards of holiness and draws a line between the church and the world.

# An Overview of Church Discipline

a. Although the city of Corinth was infamous for sexual promiscuity, this sin went beyond what the pagans practiced (**1 Cor. 5:1**)! But, it didn't shock the Corinthian church! They were actually boasting about their acceptance and love toward this man who was intimate with his stepmother (**1 Cor. 5:2**)! I believe that the woman was probably not a believer, or Paul would have told the church to remove her as well. But he says that they should have mourned and removed this man from their midst.

b. Scripture is clear over & over again that the church is to be distinct from the world by being separated to our God (**1 John 2:15**).

c. The lesson that Paul was trying to get the Corinthian church to understand is true for us today as well — If we don't uphold God's standards of holiness, it doesn't take long for the church to become just like the world!

C. I hope we all understand now that the purposes of church discipline are to: 1) vindicate God's His honor and holiness publicly; 2) convey biblical love & seek to restore the sinner; 3) restore purity and deters others from sinning; and 4) display God's standards of holiness and draw a line between the church and the world.

## II. The Problems that Require Church Discipline

A. Again if I am going to be doing something I not only want to know the "why," I also want to know the "when." Is there a deadline that I need to be aware of? How do I know when I should be doing which part? Before we leave this passage we need to note a few more aspects that are necessary for us to understand that help us identify the "when" of church discipline.

B. The person must be a professing believer.

1. Paul had written a now lost letter in which he told the church not to associate with immoral people (**1 Cor. 5:9**). Now he clarifies that he did not mean unbelievers, but rather a "so-called brother" who is immoral or covetous or an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or a swindler (**1 Cor. 5:11**). He states (**1 Cor. 5:12**) that it is God's business to judge those outside of the church, but it is the church's responsibility to judge those within the church.

2. Our first step in determining when to exercise church discipline should be to make sure that the sinning person is someone who is a child of God.

# An Overview of Church Discipline

C. The person must associate with this body.

1. The church at Corinth was told to remove this sinful member from their church body (**1 Cor. 5:2; 7; 13**). You see the way that church discipline is designed by God to work is that when the unrepentant sinner is removed from the fellowship of the church, they miss those relationships so much that restoring those relationships becomes the motivation for them to repent. This is what we see happened with this man - **2 Cor. 2:5-11**

2. Our second step in determining when deals with relationships. Some churches wait years before acting. Problem is that the relationships are no longer there - which means church discipline is not going to accomplish what God designed it to.

D. The person must be knowingly and defiantly disobedient.

1. We shouldn't publicly discipline a person for spiritual immaturity. We all need to grow in humility, love, patience, kindness, etc. Note that there had been some confusion about Paul's teaching & so he clarifies what he meant (**1 Cor. 5:9-11**). This calls for discernment.

2. (**1 Thess. 5:14**) We should not encourage the unruly, but admonish him. We should not admonish the fainthearted or weak, but encourage and help them. Sometimes, a newer believer is in sin due to ignorance of God's Word. He is weak. But, if he continues defiantly in the sin after you show him what the Word says, he then becomes unruly.

3. The analogy of child rearing is helpful here. If my 9 year-old is acting like a 9 year-old, I don't discipline him for being 9, instead I try to help him learn how to behave in a more mature manner. But when my 9 year-old is defiant, I must deal with his rebellion.

4. If a believer is overcome by a sin, but is repentant and wants help, we help them. But if they say, "I have a right to do as I please," then they are defiant and needs stronger confrontation.

E. The person must be disobeying the clear commands of Scripture.

1. Two things that we need to note about this:

a. First, you don't discipline someone for areas on which the Bible has no clear commandments (**1 Cor. 5:1**).

# An Overview of Church Discipline

b. Church discipline is not limited to select sins (**1 Cor. 5:11**). If you are doing discipline as a part of discipleship, then you address known sins...period.

2. Scripture contains many lists of sins (**1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 4:25-5:6; 1 Tim. 1:9-10; 2 Tim. 3:2-5; etc.**). We may summarize these as:

- Violations of God's moral commandments (**1 Cor. 5:10-11; 6:9-10; 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:3-5**).
- Unresolved relational sins - gossip, slander, anger, and abusive speech (**Matt. 18:15-20; Eph. 4:25-31; Gal. 5:19-21; Col. 3:8**).
- Divisiveness in the church (**Rom. 16:17-18; Titus 3:10; 3 John 9-10**).
- False teaching (**Gal. 1:8-9; 1 Tim. 1:20, 6:3-5; 2 John 9-11**).
- Disorderly conduct and refusal to work (**2 Thess. 3:6-15; 1 Tim. 5:8**).

F. I hope we all understand now that the problems church discipline is meant to address are those that involve believers who are knowingly being disobedient by violating God's commands & refuse to repent. While we also recognize that for issues of immaturity we need to be patient, serving to correct with grace & gentleness.

## III. The Procedure for Church Discipline

A. When I am going to do something that I need to know is the "how." Is there a certain order that I need to go in? Where do I start? What do I do next so that this is done the right way?

B. Now I want us to look at the "how" of church discipline. How do we deal with those who knowingly persist in sin? In Matthew 18:15-20 Jesus give the following steps:

### 1. A private meeting (**Matt. 18:15**)

a. Jesus says that if you have knowledge of your brother's sin, then you (not the shepherds) are the one to go to him. While you should pray before you go, you should not call 15 people to have them pray. That just spreads gossip. You may need to seek confidential godly counsel, but limit it to one or two at the most. Also of someone tells you about someone else's sin, tell that person that they should be going directly to the sinning person as Jesus taught.

# An Overview of Church Discipline

b. Usually it is better to go in person, unless you're concerned for physical safety or for moral propriety. Don't put yourself in a potentially compromising situation with the opposite sex! Go in gentleness and wisdom. Sometimes, there is a need for sharp rebuke (Titus 1:13; 2:15), but usually the best course is a brotherly, heartfelt appeal (Phil. 4:2; 1 Tim. 5:1-2). If the sinning person knows that you genuinely care for him, he will be more likely to listen and respond positively.

c. Your objective is not to "set him straight" or to "get things off your chest" by telling him how wrong he is. Your aim is to get him to listen so as to win him back to the Lord. The Greek word translated "show him his fault" is a legal term that means to convince in a court of law. The best way of convincing someone of his sin is to take him to Scripture. Your opinion really doesn't matter. God's Word is the authority.

d. Check your motives. If you are going to try to prove that he's wrong and you're right, you're going for the wrong reason. So we need to check our own heart first, to make sure that we've taken any logs out of our own eyes (Matt. 7:3-5). We are not exempt from temptation and sin, so we need to look to ourselves during this process (Gal. 6:1). We should go in obedience to God, with the aim of restoring our brother to God and to those have been wronged.

e. The best discipline you will never know about. If discipline is handled correctly, the person is approached by someone, usually someone close to them, they repent and you move forward. In most cases, no one else needs to know at this point.

## 2. A private meeting with witnesses (**Matt. 18:16**)

a. These may be others who know of the problem or it may include church leaders. The point is to strengthen the reproof and to cause the offender to realize the seriousness of the situation. Our goal is to bring the sinner to repentance and restoration!

## 3. A public announcement to the church (**Matt. 18:17**)

a. Before an announcement is made to the church, the leaders should make an effort to contact the offender and warn him that his sin will become public knowledge on a particular date if he does not repent before that time.

b. If the sin has to be made public, the church should recognize that how we relate to the sinning person has to change.

# An Overview of Church Discipline

- Church members should no longer fellowship with the person as if there is no problem. Paul says not even to eat with such a one (1 Cor. 5:11).
- He tells the Thessalonians not to associate with such a one, but then adds (2 Thess. 3:15), “Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.”
- In other words, all contact is not forbidden, but we aren’t to relate on a normal, buddy-buddy level that ignores the person’s sin.
- Any contact must communicate, “We love you and we want you back in the fellowship of the church, but we can’t condone what you’re doing and we can’t enjoy fellowship together until you genuinely repent.”

## 4. Public exclusion from the church (**Matt. 18:17-20**)

a. The Lord says that the final step is (Matt. 18:17), “Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer.” If someone’s openly known sin is destroying the testimony of the church, he or she needs to be removed from the church.

b. This means that we can no longer count them as a brother or sister & that they can no longer count on us for any help or support. The goal is that the removal of help & support from their church body will make them realize that the choice that they are making is not worth it.

c. Notice that this decision is something that is to be practiced by the whole congregation. We as God’s church are not going to bind where God has not bound & neither are we going to loose where God has not loosed. Instead we will all walk together following the path that God’s word has laid out for us.

## 5. Public restoration when there is genuine repentance.

a. The hard & sad truth is that some love their sin more than they love Christ and they will not repent.

b. Others do not repent and find another church that accepts them in spite of their sin. Churches should not welcome those who are under the discipline of another church.

c. But some will repent, which involves godly sorrow over their sin (**2 Cor. 7:8-10**) and restitution where appropriate (**Philemon 18-19**). If the person expresses genuine repentance, then the church should be informed and the person should be forgiven and accepted back into the fellowship (**2 Cor. 2:8**).

# An Overview of Church Discipline

d. Of course, there should be a time of testing before a repentant person is put into positions of ministry or leadership. Also, the restoration process should include discipling to help the person grow and avoid the sin in the future.

## Conclusion

A. I don't want to give the impression that we are all perfect, because we aren't. The church is not a fellowship of sinless people. We are a fellowship of forgiven sinners who, by God's grace, are pursuing a life of holiness and obedience to our Lord. As a result of this we need to be careful not fall into spiritual pride by thinking that we are better than another member who has fallen into sin. Paul says that our response to sin in a church member should be to mourn (**1 Cor. 5:2**).

B. We as a church need to recognize that discipline is part of the process of discipleship, not a side product. Healthy discipline is a part of helping others be more like Christ. You know of areas of sin in a person's life, so you confront them in love, helping them grow and improve.

C. If we have a culture where discipline is practiced biblically, where our congregation understands this idea, and where we are all open to each other concerning where we fall short, church discipline would rarely involve people having to leave the church because we would all understand that church discipline is not done in anger, but in a redemptive way, calling us to repentance of sin as the Lord commands.

D. So today, I want to close by offering an opportunity to make our lives right with God.

- Is there sin in your life that you need to repent of? I want to encourage you to make that right today. Please know that you are not alone & that all of us here want to come along beside you so that we can walk with you through this time by your side
- Are you here today & are guilty of going to a brother or sister in the wrong motives? Or going to them in the wrong way? I want you to understand that God looks not only at the heart of the person in sin, but also at the heart of the one who is doing the correcting. I plead with you to make sure that your heart is clean in His sight.
- Are you here today & have never repented of your sins? You have never believed in Jesus & submitted your life to Him through the waters of baptism so that your sins can be forgiven? We want to help you with that as well.

E. If you need to make your life with God right, I encourage you to come & let us help you do that as we stand & sing.