

The Process of Church Discipline

How to Exercise Church Authority to Restore Sinning Christians (Matt. 18:15-20)

Introduction

1. Every church eventually encounters problems with believers living in sin. In these cases a loving body will restore them to God's holiness.
2. Key Issue: But *how* do we restore sinning Christians properly?
3. In Matthew 18:15-20 Jesus provides God's plan for loving church discipline:

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. ¹⁶But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' ¹⁷If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. ¹⁸I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.

4. This text has two main teachings outlined below. First...

I. Keep the matter as private as possible (15-17).

A. The desired end is restoration, not punishment or excommunication.

1. We must be clear that the goal of discipline is behavior change since many churches "excommunicate" to punish rather than restore (e.g., Catholic).
2. Restoration is God's goal for a wandering saint in the context (vv. 10-14).
3. Restoration is the explicit teaching of this text in verse 15b.
4. Restoration is the desired goal of church discipline in other passages (Gal. 6:1, etc.).

B. God's restoring process involves four steps that progressively tell more and more people about the sin (15-17).

1. First only the offended person should deal with it individually (15).
 - a) Note that the text deals specifically with a believer living *in sin*. This does not refer simply to differences of opinion on debatable matters. (For a list of sins worthy of discipline, see the end of this study.)
 - b) The human tendency is to tell *others* about the problem rather than the one involved, but God's command here is to keep the issue as private as possible.
 - c) While letter writing was very popular in the time of Christ, our Lord specifically says to deal with these sensitive matters face-to-face. Today this means

confrontation should never be handled via letter, phone calls or emails. It also prohibits the cowardice of anonymous communication.

(What if the offender does not repent?)

2. The offended person should then take only one or two others along (16).
 - a) These 1-2 persons should be individuals whom the offender respects as they will best help restore him/her. They should not go *instead of* the offended believer, but *along with* this person.
 - b) The OT law prohibited conviction of crimes based on only one person's testimony (Deut. 19:15). The NT teaching is the same, protecting the offender from an easily offended or lying accuser.

(What if the offender *still* does not repent?)

3. The sin should be exposed to the entire church (17a).
 - a) The church leadership certainly must be involved at this point before the matter is brought to the congregation. They also must not see the issue as a difference of opinion between two parties; the biblical basis for the offender living in sin must be clearly shown with specific passages.
 - b) Bringing the matter to the entire church is vital, since without it the sinning person will be able to find fellowship in other smaller groups within the larger church who do not know of his/her sin. Such gossip situations inevitably bring disunity, which lead to factions that can split the body.

(What, then, should the entire church do once discipline has been determined?)

4. The church should treat this person as an unbeliever (17b).
 - a) Sometimes this step has been interpreted to mean "excommunication" whereby the errant person is never contacted again.
 - b) However, Jesus said to "treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." Since Jesus treated pagans (Gentiles) and publicans with love and kindness, how does this indicate discipline? The idea here is not to be ugly or ungodly, but to follow guidelines such as:
 - (1) Don't refer to the disciplined person as a Christian.
 - (2) Seek to evangelise this person.
 - (3) Do not allow the person to participate in the Lord's Supper.
 - (4) Remove the person from membership.
 - (5) Remove this person from any responsibility in the church.

- (6) Prohibit the sinner from attending church.¹
- (7) The Corinthians had to “deliver over to Satan” a believer living in sexual sin (1 Cor. 5: 5). In like manner, proper church discipline places the erring believer out from under God’s protection into Satan’s domain.
- (8) Church members should not to eat with the disciplined person (1 Cor. 5:11).

(But why can we do all this? What right do we have to discipline our members? Because...)

II. Our church extends the authority of God himself (18-20)!

A. We act in the place of the Father when we seek to restore someone (18-19).

- 1. Too often today’s churches act as if they have no authority under God (yet we should still exercise discipline upon sinning members who leave to attend another church).
- 2. However, God has already determined what we announce as guilt or innocence (18).
 - a) “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (NIV) is a periphrastic future perfect tense. It is better rendered “shall already have been permanently bound,”² meaning, “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” (NASB Updated).
 - b) Thus, what Jesus is saying is that, when a local body follows biblical procedure in love toward restoration, the decision of the church leadership in the matter has already been preceded by heavenly dictate!
- 3. We should trust that our leaders’ prayerful judgments are God’s will (19; cf. Ps. 82:1).

B. We act in the presence and authority of Christ when we seek to restore someone (20).

- 1. The “two or three” refers to the witnesses whose testimony enacted discipline (v. 16).
- 2. The point of Christ being “in their midst” is that local church discipline acts with the presence and authority of Christ Himself.

Conclusion

- 1. Main Idea: Restore sinners because you act for God!
- 2. As a member of this church you submit to its authority under God. This means that we will lovingly seek to restore you should you fall.
- 3. Is there sin in you worthy of discipline? Clean this up now and avoid pain for us all!
- 4. Do you know anyone who needs a private confrontation?

¹ Some say they, like unbelievers, should be welcomed in services without taking the Lord’s Supper; however, in most discipline cases this is not even an issue as few disciplined believers seek to return to the assembly until repentant.

² Nigel Turner, *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1965), 80.

Purposes of Church Discipline

Why should every local church follow the procedure of Matthew 18:15-20, as difficult as this is to carry out? The NT gives at least twelve reasons each local church should lovingly seek to restore errant believers. These can all be described as three benefits each to four groupings within the local church that exercises church discipline:³

I. Benefits to the Offender

A. It restores and reconciles the offender to God and to the fellowship.

Gal. 6:1 Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.

B. It stimulates spiritual inventory in the offender that leads to restoration to the fellowship.

2 Thess. 3:13-15 ¹³And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right. ¹⁴If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. ¹⁵Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

C. It destroys fleshly lusts and returns the offender to the rule of Christ over his life.

1 Cor. 5:1-5 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. ²And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? ³Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. ⁴When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, ⁵hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.

II. Benefits to the Whole Church

A. It purifies the worship and message of the church.

1 Cor. 5:6 Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?

B. It denies the enemy any advantage or access into the church.

2 Cor. 2:10-11 If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, ¹¹in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

C. It prevents God's discipline within the local church.

Rev. 2:4-5 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. ⁵Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

³ Adapted from Ted G. Kitchens, ThD dissertation (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1989), 239.

III. Benefits to Each Individual Believer in the Church

- A. It strengthens one's faith to maintain a clear conscience.

1 Timothy 1:18-20 Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, ¹⁹holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. ²⁰Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.

- B. It promotes self-examination in the offended believer's life.

2 Corinthians 7:11 See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.

- C. It confirms individual responsibility for other believers.

Hebrews 3:13 But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

IV. Benefits to the Church Authorities

- A. It protects the Scriptures from perversion and error.

Titus 1:10-13 For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group. ¹¹They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach-- and that for the sake of dishonest gain. ¹²Even one of their own prophets has said, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons." ¹³This testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith

- B. It affirms obedience to the authority of God and his leadership.

2 Corinthians 2:9 The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything.

- C. It allows the congregation to show that they support their church leaders.

2 Corinthians 7:12 So even though I wrote to you, it was not on account of the one who did the wrong or of the injured party, but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are.

These twelve purposes for exercising church discipline show that courageous love for erring saints benefits the body in many ways. Should the church fail to discipline, one can also go through these twelve reasons for discipline and prove that the opposite truth would be true as well.

For example, consider the last purpose above: for the congregation to show support of its leaders. If the leaders do not exercise discipline when it is needed, the congregation has no opportunity to show trust in these leaders in a difficult situation. Rather, the people will distrust their leaders to handle matters in a biblical way. The unwillingness of leaders to exercise needed discipline has caused many congregations to lose respect for these leaders. May this *not* be *your* experience!

Sins that Warrant Church Discipline

All unrepentant sin is subject to corrective discipline. The scriptural emphasis is placed on those sins that especially violate the purity of the Christian community. The sins that warrant church discipline in the community are:⁴

I. Private and personal offenses that violate Christian love

- A. “If your brother sins against you...” (Matt. 18:15; cf. 5:23-24) means that even matters involving only two persons can still warrant church-wide discipline.
- B. Believers must reject “hatred ... jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition” (Gal. 5:20).

II. Divisions and factions that destroy Christian unity

- A. Romans 16:17 I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.
- B. Titus 3:10-11 Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. ¹¹You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.
- C. 1 Corinthians 5:11 ... you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is... a slanderer... With such a man do not even eat.
- D. 3 John 1:9-10 I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. ¹⁰So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us.
- E. Believers must reject “... discord, jealousy... dissensions, factions” (Gal. 5:20).

III. Moral and ethical deviations that break Christian law

- A. 1 Corinthians 5:11 ... you must not associate with anyone calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy ... or... a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.
- B. 1 Corinthians 6:1 If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? (The justified going to the unjustified for justice is certainly worthy of discipline!)
- C. 2 Thessalonians 3:6 In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.

⁴ Adapted from Ted G. Kitchens, ThD Dissertation (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1989), 240; cf. idem, “Perimeters of Corrective Church Discipline,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (April-June 1991): 201-13.

- D. Galatians 5:19 The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery.
- E. Ephesians 5:11 Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.
- F. Jude 4 For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

IV. Teaching false doctrines that reject essential Christian truth

- A. Titus 1:9-11 Every church leader “must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it. ¹⁰For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers... ¹¹They must be silenced.”
- B. 1 Corinthians 5:11 ... you must not associate with anyone calls himself a brother but is... an idolater or.... With such a man do not even eat.
- C. 1 Timothy 1:20 Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.
- D. 2 Timothy 2:18b ...They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some.

V. Do You Agree or Disagree?

To explore your own ideas on this vital subject, please mark as A, U, or D beside each statement below to show whether you Agree, are Unsure, or Disagree with the teaching.

1. A U D Justice is the local church is more important then unity (the answer is in 1 Cor. 6:6-7).
2. A U D A church can deteriorate to the point where discipline should not be enacted.
3. A U D A church leader who refuses to discipline overt sin should be replaced.

VI. Conclusion

Very few church leaders today show the commitment and courage to enact church discipline. This reflects either ignorance of God’s instructions or an unwillingness to follow them. In both cases the leaders sin against both the Lord and the body of Christ. Cancer untreated in one part of the body eventually kills the entire body.