

Church Discipline

Matthew 18:15-20

The phrase “church discipline” conjures up ideas of trials and inquisitions, of people with big hats and big agendas about how to exclude others from the church. But Jesus delivers these instructions in the context of seeking lost sheep and forgiving seventy times seven (18:12-14, 21-22). Our Triune God *is* love, three persons in one God, the divine community and source of all healthy relationships. Sin separates us from God and one another, and therefore in order to be a church that is not torn apart by sin, we have to deal with it. Most church discipline occurs informally, but it’s so necessary that the Protestant Reformers considered it a third mark of the church right after word and sacrament.

Saints & Sinners

It has been said that the church is a hospital for sinners, not a hotel for saints. It’s more like a hotel for sinful saints, since we are *simul iustus et peccator*, justified by grace through faith in Christ and still battling against sin. In this chapter on the church, Jesus tells us to imitate the faith of children, to chase lost sheep, and now to deal with sin against us. If we don’t imitate the faith of small ones we won’t even enter the kingdom. If we don’t spiritually amputate our ungodly desires we will lose everything. And if we ignore His teaching on dealing with sin it’s unlikely a church will last very long. It might keep the lights on and pay a few nice people to say sentimental things, but long before the building is torn down to make condos it will cease to be a gospel-proclaiming church. So the first thing to understand and embrace is that in the church at some point your brother in Christ will sin against you and you will need go to him (v. 15). He will also likely come to you. Jesus sets realistic expectations. When this happens naturally, as it should, people don’t usually say “I’m here to try some Matthew 18:15.” People might make a comment, gently point something out, take an opportunity to show you something, as well as talk to you directly. We learn from one another in countless ways, often by watching someone do something (e.g. correct a child) differently and better than we would and so we take note. Believers who live, work, and play together, who show hospitality, give to, and enjoy one another thereby traffic in spiritual capital that makes us more faithful and fruitful in Christ. If we are secure in the gospel and understand our identity in Jesus, we will not be shaken to the core if someone brings a sin to our attention. In fact, we’ll welcome it: “Whoever loves instruction loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid” (Prov. 12:1; cf. Ps. 141:5). And if we really love people, we will be willing to go to them: “Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful” (Prov. 27:6; cf. Matt. 7:5). God loves us as His children and therefore disciplines us in various ways (Heb. 10:8).

Due Process

Jesus gives a specific method designed to help you gain your brother: “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother” (v. 15). Love covers a multitude of sins, and it’s a glory to overlook an offense (1 Pet. 4:8; Prov. 19:11). We apply the golden rule and bring something up only when love requires it. The person sinned against is to go alone to the one who did it and in hope of winning him. There’s an objective way that the offender is a brother regardless of what has happened, but when you successfully mend a broken relationship you now enjoy him as one. The goal is forgiveness and freedom from sin. Forgiveness means letting an offense go so that you don’t bring the it up again to yourself, God, or the other person: “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us” (Ps. 103:12). Instead of complaining or talking to

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other people about someone's sin, you want to go to them in order "restore [them] in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you be tempted" (Gal. 6:1). If you really *want* to call someone out so you can set them straight, you are not in the spiritual state to do so. This applies to husbands and wives, parents and children, siblings, and the way you talk to the waitress. If he won't listen, Jesus says to get one or two more, quoting the second half of Deuteronomy 19:15: "One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established." The second witness here is not a witness to the sin committed, but a witness to the fact that the person isn't willing to repent of the thing they acknowledge they have done. If they dispute having done it and there are no other witnesses, then it's an unconfirmed accusation. People piling on this situation is just mob justice and should be treated like anonymous accusations—not to be received by anyone. Jesus provides the opposite of bitterness and agenda-driven conflict. You take one or two with you not to spread the bad news but to be there to help the person. If that fails, you tell it to the church, and the church goes to him (v. 17). This is not the church as in each-and-every person, but leaders who are commanded to shepherd the flock and who will give account for souls (1 Pet. 5:1-4; Heb. 13:17). Christ loves us and connects us to one another so that we would walk faithfully with Him. This why we take marriage, baptism, and wedding vows in front of each other—to witness and support our commitments. When we love one another this way in the church it's very difficult to walk away from Jesus.

Heathen & Tax Collectors

When someone won't listen to the church, Jesus says to let him be as a heathen and tax collector (Matt. 18:17). Matthew must have smiled when he wrote this, tax collector that he was. Remember that no sin can separate you from the love of God, and that the only reason anyone walks away from Christ is because they refuse His mercy. It's not that you have to be good enough to be a Christian; you have to know you are bad enough to require God's mercy for your sin. Those who walk away full of self-pity are too proud to believe God when He says He will wash away all their sins. How does Jesus treat tax collectors and sinners? How often did he eat with them (Matt. 11:19; Lk. 7:39)? When people are excommunicated for rejecting God's mercy, then they are put out of the church and eligible for evangelism. Paul says to do this in hope that they'll come back to Christ (1 Cor. 5:5). If they don't, then the church still maintains integrity because it's hypocrisy to be a Christian and unrepentant of sexually immorality, covetousness, idolatry, a reviler, a drunk, or an extortioner, and we shouldn't take communion with such people (1 Cor. 5:11). Church discipline maintains the purity of the church. The issue is never committing particular sin, but rather identifying with and continuing in it without repentance (1 Cor. 6:9-11). No doubt many tax collectors who came to Christ still fought against covetousness, which is what the church is for. The church binds and looses on earth, and God honors it in heaven (v. 18). You can do all things through a verse taken out of context, but the two or three gathered in Jesus' name are elders praying to God about hard things in the church and thus need His presence through the Spirit (vv. 19-20).