



# Healthy Church

## Session Ten: Church Discipline

### THE LESSON AT A GLANCE

“Discipline” may bring up negative ideas. Whether we’re talking about the discipline to get up early to exercise, to stop adding impulse purchases to our shopping carts, or to avoid that second piece of dessert, discipline is something we rarely enjoy.

But the Bible teaches us that discipline is a good thing. God disciplines us as a sign of His love and a way to grow our faith.

Sometimes, discipline is corrective. When believers reject God’s Word, sinning against one another, other believers are to shine the light on sin and seek to restore one another to fellowship.

Today, as we talk about church discipline, look for ways God’s corrective action can be a gift and blessing in the lives of those He loves.

### TODAY’S SCRIPTURES

Hebrews 12:5-13; Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

### THE MAIN IDEA

God disciplines those He loves. Church discipline, while difficult, ultimately seeks to demonstrate love, work for reconciliation, and pursue holiness.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

*What is church discipline? What is its place in the church today?*

### SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT

**Hebrews 12:5-13** Like a caring parent, God disciplines His children because He loves them. No discipline is fun, but Scripture says it matures us and grows fruit of righteousness in our lives.

**Matthew 18:15-17** When conflict arises between believers, Scripture gives us a clear path for peace. The offended person should go to the other party personally, privately, and promptly to seek resolution. At an impasse, unresolved sin and conflict should be taken to church leadership. The heart of discipline is reconciliation in the body.

**1 Corinthians 5:1-13** Egregious sin in the church must be dealt with swiftly. Scripture is clear that unrepentant sin not only endangers the offender but also threatens the work of Christ among a congregation. The fruit of discipline is holiness, and believers should lovingly hold one another accountable for living in ways that honor God.



## START HERE

When the church is functioning as God designed, there's nothing like it. It's a place of love, hope, encouragement, and growth. But when it gets off track, the good, Christlike qualities are overtaken by bad ones. As members of the body of Christ, we need to know our role in helping our church function in ways that align with God's plan. Church discipline, with the goal of edification and restoration, is one of the roles God has given believers.

## DISCUSS

What comes to mind when you hear the word *discipline*? What are some ways misuses of discipline in our lives or culture might have tainted our understanding of church discipline?

## REVIEW AND DISCUSS THE TEXT

### 1. The author of discipline is God.

Hebrews 12:5-13: *My son, do not take the Lord's discipline lightly or lose heart when you are reproved by him, for the Lord disciplines the one he loves and punishes every son he receives.*

*Endure suffering as discipline: God is dealing with you as sons. For what son is there that a father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline—which all receive—then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had human fathers discipline us, and we respected them. Shouldn't we submit even more to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time based on what seemed good to them, but he does it for our benefit, so that we can share his holiness. No discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*

*Therefore, strengthen your tired hands and weakened knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated but healed instead.*

#### *Unpacking Hebrews 12:5-13*

Think back to high school. Did you play any sports? If so, you'll remember some of the methods coaches employed to get you in shape, correct poor form, or even punish you for missing practice, goofing off when you should have been working, or failing to put in the effort. Maybe you had to run laps, do extra sprints, come to early morning practice, or run the bleachers. At the time, you may have thought your coach was being unreasonable or even mean. As adults, we recognize that a good coach guides athletes to constructive discipline so that they can perform the best. Those extra sprints may have helped you remember to get to practice on time,



or they may have helped you get lighter on your feet or faster on the field. While that kind of discipline isn't fun, it serves a purpose in helping you grow.

This week, we are investigating what Scripture says about church discipline. The Bible lays out several steps that churches and individual believers can take to support one another toward godliness. While discipline isn't easy, "it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:11).

Before we can understand the right practice of church discipline, we must begin by looking at how God disciplines us. First, it is important to distinguish between punishment and discipline. Punishment is a consequence of sin and serves to enact judgment and retribution for an offense. In the Bible, it is almost unilaterally used to describe God's righteous vengeance against the enemies of God who willfully set themselves against Him and His people (Exodus 12:12; Deuteronomy 32:35; Judges 16:28). Discipline, on the other hand, is an act of love and serves to correct and mature us in our faith. In the Bible, it is almost unilaterally used to describe God's corrective action or the corrective action of church leaders for the growth and development of Christ's followers.

Hebrews 12 begins with a pep rally from heaven. Believers are reminded that there is "a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us" cheering on the church, and because of that, we should "lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us" and "run with endurance the race that lies before us" (Hebrews 12:1). Believers are called to self-discipline in our speech and conduct, as we diligently run toward maturity in Christ. The passage goes on to remind us, "And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons: My son, do not take the Lord's discipline lightly or lose heart when you are reproved by him, for the Lord disciplines the one he loves and punishes every son he receives" (Hebrews 12:5-6).

A biblical understanding of discipline begins with an awareness that God disciplines us as His children and that His corrective work in our lives is evidence of His love for us. It is also worth noting that the word translated "punish" in verse 6 is elsewhere translated "reprove" (ESV) and is a different word altogether than the word for God's "punishment/vengeance" directed toward His enemies.

God disciplines us because He loves us. Just as parents discipline their children, wanting them to grow in Christlike behavior, morals, and actions, God disciplines us as His children. Scripture says we are to receive this discipline joyfully, even when it is hard. Like in a healthy parental and child relationship, we can submit to God's discipline as evidence of His love and our position as His children.

In his book *The Root of the Righteous*, A. W. Tozer said, "It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until He has hurt him deeply."<sup>1</sup> Tozer is not referring to cruelty here but rather to the painful pruning that precedes spiritual fruitfulness—much like the training described in Hebrews 12.



In verse 11, we are told that discipline, though difficult at the time, “yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” Just like the coach trains an athlete to perform his or her best, we are trained by God through His loving discipline in ways that will produce righteousness in our lives. Because we trust our heavenly Father, we can submit to His authority.

But as verses 12-13 remind us, we have agency in this process. As followers of Jesus, we should set our feet on straight paths, doing what we can to live in ways that are pleasing to God, and then willfully submit to His corrective action. His ultimate goal, and ours, should be healing in our hearts as we pursue Him.

## DISCUSS

- *Do you remember a time when a coach used discipline in a way that seemed harsh, but you later realized was for good for you or the team?*
- *What are some ways God might discipline His children? How is this different from punishment?*
- *Is there an area in your life where you are reluctant to invite Christ's inspection and discipline? What might that indicate?*

## 2. The heart of discipline is reconciliation.

Matthew 18:15-17: *“If your brother sins against you, go tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he won't listen, take one or two others with you, so that by the testimony of two or three witnesses every fact may be established. If he doesn't pay attention to them, tell the church. If he doesn't pay attention even to the church, let him be like a Gentile and a tax collector to you.”*

### *Unpacking Matthew 18:15-17*

In the final seconds of the 2018 NBA finals, with the game tied, Cavaliers guard J. R. Smith secured an offensive rebound. Instead of attempting a shot or passing to a teammate, he dribbled away from the basket, unaware of the score. This misjudgment prevented the Cavaliers from taking a potential game-winning shot. LeBron James's visible frustration on the court, including animated gestures and expressions, was widely interpreted as a public display of disappointment in Smith's error. While the team was predictably upset with the loss, LeBron James was criticized most for publicly airing his frustration with his teammate.

When someone commits an offense against us, whether a missed point in a critical game, a misplaced priority, or a misspoken word, it's easy to carry an offense. When someone egregiously wrongs us, it's natural to want to retaliate or to call them out publicly to experience shame. But God has given us a better way. Jesus calls us to deal with conflict in the church personally, privately, and promptly, as the appropriate response when someone sins against us.



Matthew 18:15-17 is often quoted as the biblical standard for conflict resolution, but Jesus's simple formula for dealing with sin in the church is easier said than done. However, the text teaches that when we lean into healthy conflict resolution, relationships can be preserved and the church can continue to have a positive influence in the community. Ken Sande, founder of Peacemaker Ministries and author of *The Peacemaker*, wrote, "Conflict is not necessarily bad. In fact, conflict is an opportunity to glorify God, serve others, and grow to be like Christ."<sup>2</sup>

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It is important to note that this teaching specifically relates to conflict within the church. In the next section, we will address our interactions with non-believers, but for now, let's lay the foundation for addressing conflict between Christians. While the first part of Jesus's teaching includes good conflict resolution skills to use in any relationship, church discipline is reserved for the body of Christ.

First, we are to approach the person who sinned against us. Matthew 18:15 begins, "If your brother sins against you, go tell him his fault." Managing conflict between believers should never be a game of telephone. The offended person should go personally and directly to the one who committed the offense. Unlike in Monopoly, there is no room in Jesus's teaching to take a lap around the board, telling everyone else what happened. Do not pass "go." Instead, make it a priority to go directly to the person. Leviticus 19:17 says: "Do not harbor hatred against your brother. Rebuke your neighbor directly, and you will not incur guilt because of him." When we go to a fellow believer personally, we give them a chance for direct restoration.

Second, we are to go to the person privately. Matthew 18:15 continues, telling believers to keep the conflict "between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won your brother." When someone sins against us, our first and preferred step should be to settle the issue privately. Going to the person privately allows him or her the dignity of self-reflection and correction and helps make possible the goal of discipline: reconciliation. Remember, the goal is not shame or punishment; the goal is restoration of relationships among brothers and sisters, with Christ, and with God. In Galatians 6:1, we read, "Brothers and sisters, if someone is overtaken in any wrongdoing, you who are spiritual, restore such a person with a gentle spirit, watching out for yourselves so that you also won't be tempted." Going to the person privately is a way to honor your relationship and allow them to make it right.

Third, we should go to the person promptly. Offenses rarely lessen when they are ignored. Going to the person promptly allows a situation to be resolved before it escalates. Ephesians 4 says, "Be angry and do not sin. Don't let the sun go down on your anger" (v. 26). When we deal with a matter promptly, we "don't give the devil an opportunity" (Ephesians 4:27). Sometimes, we will be the ones who sin against a brother or sister. Whether the offended or the offender, promptly dealing with conflict honors Christ and preserves relationships.

It is important to note that conflict resolution does not always lead to reconciliation, especially for those among us who have suffered unjustly at the hands of unrepentant sin or gross injustice. For some, calling out the offense, handing the person over to authorities as appropriate, and then entering a healing season with Christ to preserve our ability to trust others and experience joy is the healthiest action. The apostle Paul said it well in Romans 12:18: "If it is possible, as far as it



depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (NIV). Sometimes it's not possible. Sometimes, particularly where crimes are committed, the outcome does not depend on you. And sometimes, a peaceful relationship with an unrepentant person isn't safe or wise. In those instances, we draw near to Christ, who is Himself our peace (Ephesians 2:14).

Sometimes, despite our best efforts, going to the offender personally, privately, and promptly isn't enough—sometimes, an unrepentant person simply will not listen. Jesus initiated a structure in Matthew 18:16-17 for just such an occasion. "But if he won't listen, take one or two others with you, so that by the testimony of two or three witnesses every fact may be established. If he doesn't pay attention to them, tell the church. If he doesn't pay attention even to the church, let him be like a Gentile and a tax collector to you." Notice the order in which Jesus calls for church discipline to be enacted. The first step is to go back to the offender with one or two other believers. Even at this stage of correction, the goal is to establish the truth of what happened privately and pursue reconciliation.

If the offender continues in their harmful behavior, Jesus said the matter should be taken to the church. At this juncture, churches might have various protocols for what happens next. The appropriate next step would be pastoral leadership, who might call for action from a small group such as deacons or elders, and then perhaps to a church business meeting for discussion and vote. It is a rare occurrence that situations would escalate to this level of correction. Still it is important that the structure is there to help church leadership navigate these challenging situations.

Finally, if the offender continually refuses to repent and seek restoration for their actions, Jesus said they are to be turned out from the fellowship of believers and essentially cut off from the body. Such a drastic severing of relationships should be a last resort for the church. Even when such action is merited, the goal is that the excommunicated person would, through this difficult but necessary discipline, repent of his or her sins and seek restoration to God and other believers (1 Corinthians 5:5). At every point, God's heart in discipline is reconciliation.

## DISCUSS

- *Have you ever been called out publicly for something you did wrong, even as a kid? How could the embarrassment have potentially prevented you from addressing the behavior?*
- *How do the principles of dealing with offense personally, privately, and promptly help both the offender and the church body?*
- *What do you find difficult about Jesus's model for church discipline?*

### 3. The fruit of discipline is holiness.



1 Corinthians 5:1-13: *It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and the kind of sexual immorality that is not even tolerated among the Gentiles—a man is sleeping with his father's wife.*

*And you are arrogant! Shouldn't you be filled with grief and remove from your congregation the one who did this? Even though I am absent in the body, I am present in spirit. As one who is present with you in this way, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who has been doing such a thing. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus, and I am with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, hand that one over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.*

*Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little leaven leavens the whole batch of dough? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new unleavened batch, as indeed you are. For Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us observe the feast, not with old leaven or with the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.*

*I wrote to you in a letter not to associate with sexually immoral people. I did not mean the immoral people of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters; otherwise, you would have to leave the world. But actually, I wrote you not to associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister and is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or verbally abusive, a drunkard or a swindler. Do not even eat with such a person. For what business is it of mine to judge outsiders? Don't you judge those who are inside? God judges outsiders. Remove the evil person from among you.*

#### *Unpacking 1 Corinthians 5*

Imagine you are the second leg on a high school's relay team. Over the course of the season, you decide to change your grip when passing the baton, moving it from your left to your right hand unannounced. Then, in an important race, you miss the handoff, causing the other person to drop the baton, and your team finishes last. Instead of working together, your individual choice caused harm to the rest of the team. Now, imagine that your teammates and coach never discuss the problem with you, because they don't want to make you angry. The problem never improves. How cohesive would your team be? When a problem is brewing among teammates, the only way to get back on the same page is to address the conflict and learn to work together toward a common goal.

At some point in today's session on church discipline, you might be tempted to think, "What if we just ignore these kinds of things in church? Isn't it better to get along than to have this kind of conflict? Besides, who are we to judge, anyway? Didn't Jesus say, 'judge not?' Why can't we just let people in the church do their own thing if it isn't hurting someone else?"

While ignoring issues within the church might feel like the comfortable thing to do in the moment, it can create a false sense of peace that ultimately does more harm than good. The Bible is clear that we all belong to the body of Christ. When one part suffers because of



unrepentant sin, the rest of the body will also feel the effects. That's what has happened to the church in Corinth that Paul addressed during this lengthy, but important rebuke in 1 Corinthians 5.

In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together*, he wrote, "Nothing can be more cruel than the leniency which abandons others to their sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe rebuke which calls another Christian in one's community back from the path of sin."<sup>3</sup>

In 1 Corinthians 5:1-8, Paul brings to their attention the sin of a particular member. A man in their congregation was carrying on a sexual relationship with his stepmother. Paul said this vile arrangement was not even accepted by unbelieving Gentiles. However, the church in Corinth looked the other way, choosing to brag about their church's growth and prosperity rather than lament the sin of a brother. In verse 2, Paul said the only acceptable recourse was to remove this person from their fellowship immediately.

Even in Paul's strict rebuke, you might notice that his heart was for holiness in the church and the life of this fallen believer. In verse 5, he said, "hand that one over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord." Paul was hopeful that swift corrective action on the part of the church would cause the man to repent and be saved.

In verses 9-11, Paul told the church it was not only sexual sin that they should be swift to address. He said immorality, greed, cheating, idolatry, sexual immorality, abuse, and drunkenness all break apart families and churches. Such sin should be addressed so that the offender might repent and be restored while there is still time.

Finally, Paul addressed the question we asked earlier, "Who are we to judge, anyway? Didn't Jesus say, 'judge not?'" In verses 12-13, Paul wrote, "For what business is it of mine to judge outsiders? Don't you judge those who are inside? God judges outsiders. Remove the evil person from among you." It is not the church's job to judge people who are not followers of Jesus. That is God's job. However, it is the task of the church to appropriately address the unrepentant sin of believers, particularly when that sin impacts the fellowship and witness of the local church. God's Word is clear: Those who seek to remain in fellowship while remaining in unrepentant sin should be removed from the congregation—lovingly, carefully, prayerfully, and always with an eye toward the heart of God. The fruit of discipline is holiness, in our lives and in His church. As we cooperate with the Holy Spirit in matters of church discipline, we demonstrate the loving care our heavenly Father has for His children (Hebrews 12:6).

## DISCUSS

- Have you ever experienced someone in your school, sports team, or workplace "going rogue" and it negatively impacting the performance of the rest of the team?



- *Why do you think Paul called the church to deal so harshly with the sin in Corinth? What would be at risk if they continued to do nothing?*
- *How does thoughtful church discipline benefit the offending person and the church as a whole?*

## GOSPEL FOCUS

Long before we knew we needed it, God saw our spiritual condition: We were sinful, lost, and without hope. He sent Jesus, who knew no sin, to take the punishment that our sin deserves. Christ reconciled us to God, and now we have the ministry of reconciliation: helping others to hear, know, and respond to His love.

"Everything is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he has committed the message of reconciliation to us." 2 Corinthians 5:18-19

## REFLECT ON THE TEXT

### DISCUSS

- *How did today's discussion help you think about God's discipline in a new way?*
- *How have you been challenged to address conflict in personal, private, and prompt ways?*

## RESPOND TO THE TEXT

Why are accepting discipline, managing conflict, and addressing sin so vital in the lives of believers and in the church? What makes us reluctant to engage with one another in this way?

### APPLY

God has called us not to ignore conflict and sin in the church but to address it in the way He has given. How can managing conflict well help us grow in Christ's love and unity?

## REFERENCES



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<sup>1</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2007), 39.

<sup>2</sup> Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 30.

<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian in Community* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2009).