

Healthy Church
Session Ten: Church Discipline
Commentary

Matthew 18:15-17

18:15. “Church discipline” is commonly thought to refer only to those “official” cases in which the sin is extremely serious and the entire church becomes formally involved in the effort to correct the sinning brother or sister. In reality, church discipline is more biblically understood as covering every effort by any individual or group of individuals in the church to turn a straying believer back to righteous living.

For this reason, Jesus addressed first every church member’s responsibility to go privately (between the two of you) to the sinning brother to show him his sin (“bring to light, expose”). This is the gentlest of the four steps of church discipline for several reason: (1) It is based on the foundation of a relationship between the confronter and the straying brother. This increases the likelihood that the confrontation will be perceived as a loving act. (2) It is done in private to preserve the dignity of the straying brother. The smaller the number of people involved, the more likely the brother’s embarrassment will not be a hindrance to his further growth. (3) The confronter’s main task is to show the straying brother his sin. We must go into every confrontation assuming the best—that what we might perceive is a willful sin is possibly a matter of negligence, or that we have wrongly perceived the person’s actions, and that the straying brother or sister will respond correctly. (4) Go is in the Greek present tense (imperative mood), implying a gentle, patient series of confrontations.

The motive is love, and the goal is to make it as easy as possible for the straying brother or sister to receive the message and make the change. We are to make every effort to avoid public or private humiliation. This is every church member’s responsibility, and we are to remain focused on the central purpose of restoration. Maintaining the focus to correct the straying believer in a spirit of love will guide us in selecting the best words, setting, timing, and manner for the confrontation. To do this properly takes time and prayer.

The relationship between the two brothers also implies that there is a prior history between the two, through which a spirit of trust and acceptance has developed. Therefore, effective church discipline requires an investment before the first step. We must be involved in one another’s lives—sharing life experiences, showing trust and transparency, learning one another’s nonverbal language, priorities, dreams, and fears. Our successful involvement in the Father’s pursuit of the straying brother depends on our prior investment in the relationship.

After explaining the first step for confronting a sinning brother, Jesus acknowledged the better of two possible responses. He might actually listen, in which case you have won your brother over. We are to read into this statement all the joy of the Father over the rescued sheep in 18:13. And we are to assume that this is a much more likely outcome than many believers think possible. Done correctly in the environment of a trusting relationship, one-on-one confrontation will often result in a positive response. Let us start by believing in the power of

God to turn a heart and the longing of every believer for the fulfillment and security of holy living.

18:16. In 18:15b, Jesus acknowledged the second and worse response toward a straying brother—continued resistance. In this case, the next step is to take one or two others along. Including the original confronter, this increases the number of confronters to two or three. This is important, as Jesus showed from Deuteronomy 19:15 (also Num. 35:30; Deut. 17:6). These numbers are based on the requirement, under Mosaic Law, that no accusation should be taken seriously unless it was confirmed by the testimony of more than one witness.

The purpose of the additional witnesses is primarily: (1) to bring added loving persuasion to the straying brother so he will realize the seriousness of his sin; (2) to prepare for the possibility of the straying brother's continued resistance (in this event, there would be third-party testimony concerning what happened in the confrontation); and (3) to provide one or two "referees" or moderators in the continued confrontation between the original confronter and the straying brother. It is possible the witnesses might conclude that the accuser was wrong. Again, the hope is that the two or three witnesses will be able to cooperate in the Father's zealous pursuit of the straying brother in order to bring him back from the danger of destruction (18:12–14).

An important question that Jesus did not address is how long the moderators should wait for the brother to respond before progressing to step 2 (and between later steps, as well). This will probably vary from situation to situation, but there must be a balance between gracious patience (allowing the brother sufficient time for a change of heart) and unwavering truthfulness (not waiting so long that the straying brother and other observers conclude that the sin in question is not serious).

18:17. If every effort to turn the straying brother back to righteous ends in futility, the only alternative is to tell it to the church. What Jesus had in mind for the gathering of believers who should hear about the brother's sin can be debated. In the first century, where communities were close-knit and the local churches were small house gatherings, everyone would naturally be a party to this problem. Because all might be affected by the brother's sin, all church members should be warned of its danger. This way, all might be instrumental in helping bring the offender back to righteousness.

However, in our society today, many relationships—even within the church—are superficial. Especially in larger churches, there may be situations that would warrant a public announcement only to the segment of the local church that needs to know about the brother's sin and that is in a position to respond to it.

At least the following church members should be included: (1) anyone who is likely to be harmed or misled by not knowing about the sin or by failing to recognize its sinfulness and seriousness; (2) anyone who should be warned by the sinning brother's negative example; and (3) anyone who can be instrumental in bringing the straying brother back to righteousness. The

two or three starts with as few as possible for adjudication. And the local “church” is the highest ecclesiastical court on earth. In between could be other groups (e.g. a small Bible study group, a large Sunday school class, a group of elders). The primary goal of church discipline is not public embarrassment but the recruitment of the entire church to help in the Father’s pursuit of the straying believer.

In the event that the believer continues to resist the appeals of all his brothers and sisters, he is to be removed from the fellowship. He has refused submission to the church (Heb. 13:17). Therefore, he is to be treated as an unbeliever, which is precisely the position he has taken. Just as the Lord is open to receiving a repentant Pharisee (Matt. 3:7–8; John 3:1–21; 7:50–52; 19:38–42), so also Jesus should be seen here as leaving the door open for even a hardened heart such as this to soften and return.

The Bible insists that every Christian be accountable to the local assembly. The Bible knows nothing of an isolated, individual Christian. The issue is not technology but theology. Christ insists the members of his body act like it!¹

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

5:1. By saying, It is actually reported, Paul indicated his astonishment at the situation he was about to address. The original language of this passage conveys the idea that the news shocked and horrified Paul. He was appalled to hear that the church tolerated sexual immorality which even pagans found morally repulsive: a man had his father’s wife. In the context of sexual immorality, the verb “to have” did not refer to occasional sexual liaisons, but to a continuing sexual relationship. The man may actually have lived with his father’s wife as if she were his own wife.

Paul described the woman not as the man’s “mother,” but as his father’s wife. This terminology probably identifies her as the man’s stepmother rather than his biological mother. Paul did not indicate whether the man’s father still lived, but if the father was alive the immorality was all the more severe.

5:2. Paul continued to express his astonishment by focusing on the Corinthians’ reaction: they were proud of their tolerance. They actually took pride in their willingness to accept the unrepentant, immoral man. By taking pride in such a blatantly sinful thing, they exposed the error of their pride.

Instead of proudly accepting the man, the church should have been filled with grief. Paul wanted his readers to experience great sorrow over their fellow believer’s sin because that immorality was destructive both to the sinner and to the church. Sorrow over the sins of others appears as a proper response on a number of occasions in Scripture (Gen. 6:5–6; Ezra 10:1; Rom. 9:2–3).

¹ Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).

The Corinthians were blind to the imminent destruction this immorality threatened to bring upon the church and their friend. This lack of concern for the church seems to have permeated the Corinthians, and it appears as a unifying theme throughout the entire letter.

Paul also demanded that the Corinthians take proper corrective action. Without having to be told, his readers should have put out the immoral man from their fellowship. Excommunication was the only proper response to such a flagrant and severe sin. In the Old Testament, such sin was punishable by the deaths of the sinners (Lev. 20:11) and the exile of the entire nation from the land (Lev. 18:28).

5:3. Evidently, some Corinthian believers hesitated to discipline their wayward brother so long as Paul was absent. To counter this strategy, Paul argued that he was present with them in spirit. He had already made his preliminary judgment. If the charges were true as reported, he supported removing the man from Christian fellowship. Paul's words sound harsh to our modern ears (cf. 1 Tim. 5:20), but they are in line with the teachings of Jesus (Matt. 18:15–17). Moreover, Paul's outlook was quite balanced, as demonstrated in other epistles (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13; 2 Thess. 3:15). In 2 Corinthians 2:6–8, for instance, he corrected the church's refusal to restore a repentant brother. In the face of the Corinthians' tolerance, however, he encouraged the church to remove the man from the Christian community.

5:4. The procedures for church discipline of this public sin are straightforward. First, the right setting must be attained. Christian discipline is not to be performed any way the church desires. It is a solemn occasion when the church is officially assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus. The apostle assured them that he also would be present in spirit and that the Holy Spirit's displays of power would be evident as well. Church discipline is too serious a matter to administer in an ordinary setting.

5:5. Second, the church must temporarily give the offender over to Satan. To do this is to exclude the wayward brother from the Christian community and to treat him as "a pagan or a tax collector" as Jesus instructed (Matt. 18:17). It is to deliver him into Satan's sphere of influence (John 12:31; 16:11; Eph. 2:2). Paul used similar terminology to describe other church discipline cases as well (1 Tim. 1:20). The purpose of this action is destruction of the sinful nature. In Scripture Satan occasionally receives permission from God to test and trouble believers by weakening their physical conditions (Job 2:4–6; 2 Cor. 12:7), so it is possible that Paul referred to this type of destruction here.

In cases of church discipline, the goal of the process is that the person's spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord. Here Paul used an Old Testament term describing the day on which God destroys all of his enemies and blesses his people. The New Testament often uses this term for the second coming of Christ (1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10). Although a true believer under discipline may endure hardship, the goal of that hardship is repentance that will lead to salvation on the day of final judgment. Discipline should ultimately be redemptive.

5:6–7a. Paul's main concern here was for the church, which he was jealous to protect from corruption. Thus, even though the incestuous man had sparked the occasion for Paul's rebuke,

Paul insisted that the larger problem lay in the church itself. The church should have recognized that its toleration of such public sin transgressed its holy calling.

Paul had already identified pride as the source of this problem (5:2). Here he returned to that matter by asserting that the Corinthians' boasting was not good. Their attitude of boastful tolerance of scandalous sin in the church opposed the truth that boasting is to be done only to the Lord's glory (1 Cor. 4:7). This attitude also failed to understand common experience. The sin of this one man would have a deleterious effect on the entire church if it remained unchecked. On the basis of this common knowledge, Paul insisted that they deal with the sin.

The church is to be a new batch of dough without infectious impurity. As Paul pointed out, the church really is a pure, wholesome community of believers because it exists in Christ. Paul's command might be summarized, "You are pure, so start acting like it."

5:7b–8. The reason for removing the old leaven of the immoral person from the church is rooted in the significance of Christ's death. He is our Passover. As the lamb was slaughtered in the first Passover in the days of Moses (Exod. 12:21) and annually after that (Exod. 12:42), Christ has been sacrificed on the cross. His blood protects believers from the wrath of God like the blood spread on the entrances to Israelite homes in Egypt (Exod. 12:7). The Passover celebration anticipated the final atoning work of Christ's death (John 1:29; Rev. 13:8).

Building on this connection, Paul reminded his readers that one aspect of the Passover celebration was the removal of all leaven from the home and the baking of bread without leaven. The absence of leaven symbolized the hasty deliverance of the Hebrew people from the trials of Egypt (Exod. 12:33–34, 39). In much the same way, Paul urged the Corinthians to remember that they had to remove the old leaven of immorality from their church because they lived in the age of Christ's Passover sacrifice. In this sense, the church is to keep the Festival of Passover every day without the old leaven of malice and wickedness.

All evil should be resisted and removed whenever possible so the people of God may metaphorically eat bread without leaven. Their lives are to consist of sincerity and truth. Immorality was unacceptable in the church because it introduced a corrupting influence among the people of God.

Paul said the Christian life was to be without the leaven of malice. He probably referred to those who opposed him in Corinth (4:18), or to those who caused division (1:10–12). "Malice" clearly did not describe the church's attitude toward the incestuous man. At this point, Paul was still thinking in broad terms. Rather than just correcting a problem of immorality, he was purifying, unifying, and protecting the church. Everything he had said so far in the letter was aimed at this goal. He saw the particular Corinthian problems as manifestations of deeper problems such as bad theology and bad attitudes. Thus, he urged them to avoid malice, a root problem, even though it did not pertain directly to the particular manifestation of that root problem which he happened to be addressing (proud tolerance of sexual immorality).

5:9–10. Paul clarified one aspect of his instruction that may have been easily misunderstood. He referred to a previous letter in which he had written that believers were not to associate with sexually immoral people. This instruction could easily have been misunderstood (or purposefully twisted) to mean that believers should withdraw entirely from all immoral people. Paul ridiculed this misunderstanding of his earlier words by noting that avoiding all immoral people can only happen if Christians leave this world.

Since Christians must minister to the world, they must not separate themselves from all who are greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. These people are the church's mission field (see Matt. 9:10–13; Luke 15:1–32).

Possibly, those in Corinth who opposed Paul used this misunderstanding to undermine Paul's ministry and authority. They may have suggested that Paul called Christians to stay away from all sinners, and on that basis discounted all his teaching. Paul treated the Corinthians harshly for this misunderstanding for three reasons: it stemmed from a wrong reading of his prior letter; it had led to wrongful pride and corruption in the church; and it had allowed the church's toleration of the incestuous man.

5:11. Lest there be any confusion, Paul explained that he did not have in mind the sexually immoral people of this world (i.e., unbelievers), but anyone who calls himself a brother (people in the church). Such people may not truly be believers, even though they claim to be. If they fail to give evidence of new life in Christ, there may be sufficient reason to doubt their salvation. To protect the church from the corrupting influence of these so-called brothers, followers of Christ must not even eat with anyone in the church who is immoral or greedy, an idolater ... slanderer ... drunkard or a swindler. As Paul was to write in this same letter, "Bad company corrupts good character" (15:33).

5:12–13. Paul concluded that he and the Corinthians had no right to judge those outside the church. Such people make no pretense of being Christians, and God alone will judge those. Even so, the church must judge those inside the church. Those in the church submit themselves to the authority of the body of Christ. Church discipline is a difficult and troubling process, and many churches try to avoid it. Yet, the church must take action when its members flagrantly violate the ways of Christ. Consequently, as much as the Corinthian church did not want to take action, they had to expel the wicked man.

The phrase expel the wicked man from among you alludes to the legal language of Deuteronomy (Deut. 17:7; 19:19; 24:7). In all these occurrences of the phrase, the wicked are "expelled" or "purged" by being executed (Deut. 21:21). In Old Testament Israel, God ordained execution as the means by which the nation was to purge itself of severe wickedness.

Paul applied these standards of holiness to the church, God's New Testament people, but he applied the law somewhat differently by recommending excommunication rather than execution. Nevertheless, the fact that he used language typical of death sentences from the Old

Testament reflects that he considered excommunication in the New Testament age to be quite serious. This form of church discipline should be reserved for the worst of circumstances..²

Hebrews 12:5-13

12:5–6. Verse 5 asks a question, “Have you forgotten?” based on the quotation of Proverbs 3:11–12 in verse 6. Together these verses urge us not to belittle God’s discipline and not to lose heart in the face of God’s rebuke. We should not see trials as cause for discouragement, but as a sign of God’s determined love. We must reflect on the long-term benefits of our trials and recognize that discipline represents God’s method of developing our maturity. We must respond to afflictions by searching out the faults or failures that hinder our spiritual growth.

12:7–10. These verses compare and contrast God’s discipline of his children with parental discipline of their children.

Good parents provide training and instruction for their children. Such training demonstrates that they were true sons and not illegitimate children. A good God, like a good parent, will show love by providing nurture, guidance, and direction for the child.

Children respect their human parents because of their discipline. Believers must also be submissive to the Father of our spirits. Instead of turning away from God in apostasy, we must turn to him in obedience.

Verse 10 turns from comparison to contrast. Earthly parents discipline their children only for a little while. Children grow up, leave home, and move beyond the discipline of their parents. God, however, never finishes with his children. God disciplines us for a lifetime. For this we should be thankful rather than complaining.

Earthly parents discipline their children as they think best. All of us have made dreadful mistakes in our efforts to discipline our children. Fortunately, God knows precisely what he is doing and disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. God will never commit an overkill, nor will he neglect to give discipline. The fact that we receive discipline from a wise, omniscient God who never errs in his work gives us cause for commitment to his loving discipline.

12:11. This verse contrasts a short-term and a long-term response to discipline. Whenever discipline hits us, it causes pain. We tend to complain under its burden. We find nothing pleasant about the experience. Later, for those who submit to its training, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace.

12:12–13. These verses radiate encouragement. Drooping arms and tired knees appear in people who are utterly exhausted. To lift up the hands and to strengthen the knees demands a

² Richard L. Pratt, Jr., *I & II Corinthians*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).

renewal of hope. Looking at Jesus and understanding God's purpose in discipline invigorates people who have faced spiritual exhaustion.

With new vigor we can walk on straight paths. Spiritually, this demands that we understand the beneficial effects of discipline, pull ourselves together, and move forward. If we do this, then those who are weak won't receive further spiritual injury. The entire community must experience renewed vigor to provide an example for the weak among us.³

³ Thomas D. Lea, *Hebrews & James*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999).