

The Discipline of God's Children
Matthew 18:15-20
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INTRODUCTION

1. This morning in our celebration of the Lord's Supper, I want you to turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 18.
2. I want us to see what it really means to *examine* ourselves.
3. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 11:28, "But let a man *examine* himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup."
4. As we look at Matthew 18:15-20, we will see what is involved in the purification of Christ's church.
5. Read Matthew 18:15-20.
6. God's desire for His children here on earth is purity of life.
7. It is impossible to study Scripture attentively and not be overwhelmingly convinced that God seeks above all else for His people to be holy and that He is grieved by sin of any kind.
8. Directly quoting God's command to His old covenant people Israel, Peter wrote the same command to Christ's church: "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Pet.1:16; cf. Lev.11:44).
9. Because God is so concerned for the holiness of His people, they should be equally concerned.

10. The church cannot preach and teach a message it does not live and have any integrity before God, or even before the world.
11. Yet in many churches where there is no tolerance for sin in principle there is much tolerance for it in practice.
12. And when preaching becomes separated from living, it becomes separated both from integrity and from spiritual and moral effectiveness.
13. It promotes hypocrisy instead of holiness.
14. Divorcing biblical teaching from daily living is compromise of the worst sort.
15. It corrupts the church, grieves the Lord, and dishonors His Word and His name.
16. It is not surprising, therefore, that public discipline for sin is rare in the church today.
17. Where there is little genuine desire for purity there will also be little desire to deal with impurity.
18. Talking about church discipline is not the same as the actual act even though that may be the first step in understanding what Jesus requires in His church.
19. Even the misinterpreted and misapplied statement of Jesus that we should not judge lest we be judged (Mat.7:1) has been used to justify the tolerance of every sort of sin and false teaching.
20. The church has always had a need for confronting the sins of

its people.

21. A short time after the churches beginnings, it was faced with a discipline situation.
22. Acts 5 records that when Peter confronted Ananias and Saphirra by Peter, the results were tragic – both dropped dead before him and this brought great fear on the whole community who heard of it.
23. Verse 13 of chapter 5 reads, “Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly.”
24. In this particular case in the early church, God took discipline directly into His own hands and demonstrated before all how sin is to be dealt with by removing the offenders from the church and from the earth!
25. The purity of the church not only was protected by making God’s people more fearful of sin but also by helping to keep out of the fellowship those who were not true believers.
26. The Lord has always disciplined His people, and He has always instructed His people to discipline themselves.
27. Old Testament believers were told not to “reject the discipline of the Lord, or loathe His reproof, for whom the Lord loves He reproveth, even as a father, the son in whom he delights” (Prov.3:11-12).
28. In the New Testament, we learn that “many [were] weak and sick among [the Corinthians], and many [slept]” (1 Cor.11:30) because they took of the Lord’s table in “an unworthy manner” (v.27) and were “guilty of the body and blood of the Lord” (v.27).

29. The same is true today.
30. God still disciplines His church and He expects us to discipline ourselves.
31. It is with the church's responsibility to keep itself pure that Jesus deals in Matthew 18:15-20.
32. He is still teaching about the childlikeness of believers, illustrated by the young child He had called to Himself and set before the Twelve (v.2).
33. He had declared that a person enters and is considered great in the kingdom by becoming like a little child (vv.3-4), and that, once in the kingdom, believers are to be protected like little children (vv.5-9) and cared for like little children (vv.10-14).
34. He now declares that they must also be disciplined like little children.
35. In verses 15-20 Jesus presents 5 elements involved in godly discipline of sinning believers.

I. The Person Who Receives Discipline (v.15a)

“Moreover, if your brother sins against you.”

A. The Person to Be Disciplined is a Brother Who Sins

1. In this context, as in many other places in Scripture, “brother” refers to any fellow believer, whether male or female

“The candidate for confrontational discipline is any Christian who sins. The implication is that it is a sin that continues in one’s life and is unconfessed” (John MacArthur, Matthew 16-23, p.126).

2. Every child of God, whether young or old, man or woman, educated or uneducated, wealthy or poor, leader or follower, is to be confronted when he or she sins

The word “sins” is from the Greek word hamartano, which has the literal meaning of “missing the mark” and is the basic NT verb for sin – “missing the mark of God’s standards.

Paul’s classic statement that has been quoted by every believer from Romans 3:23 says, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

B. The Sin Can Be Direct or Indirect

1. As reflected in the KJV and several other translations, some of the most reliable ancient manuscripts of Matthew’s gospel add the phrase “against you,” after sins, indicating an offense committed directly against a fellow Christian

2. Peter's question in verse 21 regarding forgiveness of those who sin against us gives support to the inclusion of "against you," as does the Lord's teaching about rebuking and forgiving in Luke 17:3-4

"Take heed to yourselves, If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him."

3. In either case, however, the basic responsibility is the same, because a person can be sinned against both directly and indirectly

Warren Wiersbe said, "We don't always practice humility. There are times when, deliberate or unconsciously, we offend others and hurt them. Even the Old Testament Law recognized 'sins of ignorance' (Num.15:22), and David prayed to be delivered from 'secret faults' (Ps.19:12), meaning 'faults that are even hidden from my own eyes'" (The Bible Exposition Commentary).

If the believer is "maligned, abused, deceived, cheated, or the like, the sin against him is direct and obvious. In such a case, the offending brother or sister is not only to be rebuked by the one who is offended but also forgiven if he repents" (John MacArthur, Matthew 16-23, p.127).

The one who is sinned against should approach the offender in a spirit of humility and meekness, and his motive for rebuke should be the restoration of the brother or sister to holiness.

It should never come from a spirit of vindictiveness. He should manifest a spirit of love and forgiveness even while he is rebuking, and he should be deeply concerned about the spiritual damage being suffered by the brother who sinned and have a genuine desire for him to be restored to holiness and its consequent blessing.

Rebuke of a sinning brother should be undertaken as soon as the offense is known, in order to turn the sinning believer from his sin as soon as possible and also to help head off resentment and bitterness by the one offended.

Those destructive emotions are also sins, and they tend to fester as long as there is a break in relationship remains unresolved.

The longer sin continues, the more difficult it becomes to be forsaken by the sinner and to be forgiven by the one sinned against.

God calls His children always to “be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven” them (Eph.4:32).

In a broader sense, believers are sinned against by any sin committed by any other believer. Whenever a believer commits a sin, all other believers are indirectly sinned against.

“Every sin by a believer stains the entire fellowship of believers. Whether it is slander, stealing, gossip, sexual immorality, dishonesty, doctrinal error, lack of submission, cruelty, blasphemy, profanity, drunkenness, or anything else, every sin not dealt

with by the offending child of God must be dealt with by the church” (John MacArthur, Matthew 16-23, p.127).

II. The Person Who Initiates Discipline (v.15b)

“Go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.”

“The understood subjects of *go and tell him his fault or reprove* (NASB) are indicated by the plural pronouns “you” and “your” (vv.15-16). Jesus was giving general instructions to His followers, and therefore this category is also inclusive.

A. The Person Responsible for Initiating Discipline is Any Believer Who is Aware of Another Believer’s Sin

1. Discipline is not simply the responsibility of church officials but of every believer

You don’t have the involvement of “church officials” until you have completed the first two steps.

2. The phrase “tell him his fault” or “reprove” is from *elencho*, which has the root meaning of bringing to light or exposing.

The Greek verb is in the aorist imperative, suggesting that the brother is to be shown his sin in such a way that he cannot escape recognizing it for what it is.

Marvin Vincent says “The verb means, first, to test, try, search out; therefore, to cross-examine with a view of convincing or refuting; thence to rebuke or chide” (Vincent’s Word Studies of the New

Testament).

B. The First Confrontation of a Sinning Brother Must Be in Private

1. It's "between you and him alone" – It's one on one. It does not include anyone else – just you and the person who sinned against you

John Gill says, "Do not wait for his coming to thee, as being the aggressor, to acknowledge his fault, testify his repentance, express his sorrow for his sin, and ask pardon: but go to him, and freely and faithfully lay his sin before him; but do not aggravate it, and reproach him with it, and bear hard on him for it, but gently rebuke and reprove him: let this be done in the most private manner; let none be present, nor any know of it, even the most intimate friend and acquaintance" (John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible).

2. If the erring person confesses and repents, no further discipline is necessary and no one else need ever be brought into the matter

The more a person's sin is known and discussed by others, no matter how well-meaning they may be, the easier it is for him to become resentful and the harder it may be for repentance and restoration. When he is corrected in private, and in a spirit of humility and love, his change of heart is much more likely.

The end of verse 15 indicates that if he does repent, a unique and marvelous bond of intimacy is established between the two believers, indicated by

the phrase “you have gained your brother.”

- a) Gal.2:11-14 records that Paul “withstood [Peter] to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all.”

- b) After Jesus told His disciples in Matthew 16:21 that “He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day.” It says in verse 22 that “Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, ‘Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!’ But He turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.’”

Here Peter selfishly rebuked Jesus because he didn’t want Him to suffer and be killed but Jesus quickly rebuked him by telling him that his motives were Satanic and an offense and were not “mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.”

But notice that this was a private confrontation. Peter did this privately with

Jesus even though he was wrong for why he was doing it. In that same private moment Jesus rebukes Peter.

3. God does not mock His children by demanding of them anything which, by His power, He does not enable them to do

“No Christian, therefore, has an excuse for not initiating church discipline when it is necessary, because God will provide the necessary wisdom, insight, and boldness when a sincere desire is present.”

4. Not every believer is given the gift of preaching or teaching or evangelism or helps. But every believer is given the command to go and reprove a brother or sister who is sinning

John MacArthur says, “In our day [this] is a much-needed and much-neglected ministry. The absence of it may well be the most severe and debilitating problem in the church of this century. All believers are called in this way to be ministers of holiness, helping guard the purity and integrity of Christ’s Body. When they minister discipline in a spirit of love, gentleness, and humility, they can be effective weapons in God’s hands for purifying the church and restoring His fallen children” (Matthew 16-23, pp.128-129).

The Lord commanded Israel, “You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people, and you are not to act against the life of your neighbor; I am the Lord. You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart.” But, the Lord went on to say, “you shall

surely reprove your neighbor” (Lev.19:16-17).

Unwillingness to reprove a sinning believer is a form of hatred of him, not loving him enough to warn him of his spiritual danger.

Not to reprove a sinning brother can do him more harm than slandering him.

The person who claims to be too loving to rebuke his brother or sister in Christ is simply deceived. He is not too loving but too uncaring.

The loving Christian, like the loving heavenly Father and loving earthly fathers, desires the proper discipline of those he loves.

III. The Purpose of Discipline (v.15c)

“If he hears you, you have gained your brother”

A. The Purpose of Discipline is the Spiritual Restoration of Fallen Members

1. When a sinning brother is rebuked and he turns from his sin and is forgiven, he is won back to the fellowship with the Body and with its head, Jesus Christ
2. The goal of discipline is not to throw people out of the church or to feed the self-righteous pride of those who administer the discipline – it is to bring the sinning brother back

John Gill said, ““Go and tell him his fault’ patiently,

take your reproof kindly, acknowledge his offence, declare his hearty sorrow for it, and desire it might be overlooked, and reconciliation made:

- a) Prov.11:30 says, “He who is wise win souls” (NASB).
- b) Paul admonishes Christians, “If a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted” (Gal.6:1; NASB).
- c) James says in 5:19-20, “Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.”

In some cases, as in that of the James passage, you may be confronting a professing Christian who is not even saved.

- 3. Jesus says “If he hears you, you have *gained* your brother” (v.15c).

“Gained” Gr.kerdaino is translated “won” in the NASB.

This term was originally a term of commerce referring to financial gain or profit. Here it refers to the gaining back of something of value that is lost, namely, an erring brother.

- a) As Jesus had just taught in the parable of the

lost sheep, God highly values every one of His children (v.14).

- b) When a church member falls into sin, the fellowship as a whole and each of the other members individually suffers loss, because no individual believer in the Body is reproducible

“Each believer is a unique individual and is uniquely gifted. People go to great lengths to regain material wealth that is lost. To how much greater lengths should Christians go to regain a spiritual treasure more valuable than any earthly possession?”

“Churches as well as individual Christians are tempted to say of a sinning brother, in effect if not in words, ‘We have no business getting involved. It’s his life, his decision, and his responsibility. He’s accountable to God, and what he is and does is only between him and the Lord.’”

That attitude may sound loving and spiritual on the surface, but it does not square with Scripture. It reflects ungodly indifference, not loving concern for the brother who has fallen.

B. The Purpose of Discipline is to Strengthen the Church

1. If you don’t practice discipline among one another then you will weaken the church
 - a) You contribute to the weakening of your brother

- b) You contribute to the weakening of our corporate testimony
- 2. If you don't practice discipline you are sinning against Jesus who commands all of His children to practice discipline in the church
 - a) He said to "go and tell him his fault" (v.15)
 - b) He said to forgive "up to seventy times seven" (v.22)
- C. The Purpose of Discipline is to Glorify God
 - 1. Of course every time we obey the Word of God He is glorified
 - 2. The Psalm said, "Whoever offers praise glorifies Me; and to him who orders his conduct aright I will show the salvation of God" (Ps.50:23).

IV. The Process and the Place for Discipline (vv.16-17)

"But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector."

- A. If a Sinning Brother Does Not Listen to the One Who Has Rebuked Him Privately, the Next Step is to Take Two or More Believers Along, So that By the Mouth of Two or Three Witnesses Every Fact May be Confirmed
 - 1. This basic procedure for confirming facts in a

dispute or in an allegation of wrongdoing had been set forth by Moses and was therefore familiar to every Jew

Moses said in Deut.19:15 says, “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.”

To guard against a person’s being slanderously or spitefully accused of a sin, crime, or other offense he did not commit, the Mosaic law required that at least two or three witnesses must corroborate any charge brought against someone. That was an important protection against the false accusation of an innocent person.

2. In the context of Jesus’ instruction here, if the testimony of two or three witnesses becomes necessary, it is only to confirm that the sin was committed but, in addition, to confirm that the sinning believer was properly rebuked and that he has or has not repented

It should be hoped that the one or two witnesses who are brought along to confront the sinner will not have to become public witnesses against him before the rest of the church but that their added rebuke will be sufficient to induce a change of heart in the offending brother that the initial rebuke did not cause.

- B. If the Second Stage of the Discipline Process Fails to Bring Repentance, If He Does Not Listen to the Two or Three, Then They Are to Tell It to the Church (v.17a)

1. The first rebuke is completely private
2. The second is semi-private
3. The third is to be public, before the church

The brother or sister is to be brought before the whole congregation to be further rebuked and encouraged to repent. The whole church is responsible to call that person back to repentance.

4. This great passage also indicates that the place for discipline is within the church

Jesus says, “And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church.”

The word “church” (ekklesia) is the basic, nontechnical meaning of a congregation or assembly.

In secular Greek literature it was used of town meetings, local gatherings of citizens called together by their rulers to hear official announcements or witness government ceremonies.

In the context of Jesus’ teaching at this point in His ministry, *church* refers to any group of redeemed people who assembled in His name.

- C. The Fourth and Final Step in Church Discipline is Ostracism (v.17b)

“But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.”

1. Paul said to Titus to “Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a

person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned” (Tit.3:10-11).

2. He told the Corinthians in 1 Cor.5:11 “not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner – not even to eat with such a person.”
3. To be treated “like a heathen and a tax collector” is to leave the sinning brother to his own shame

A *heathen* or as the NASB calls him a *Gentile* was one who held to traditional paganism. He had no part in the covenant, worship, or social life of Jews.

Because he was a traitor to his own people, however, a *tax-gatherer* was in many ways more despised than the Gentiles. He was not an outcast by birth but by choice.

Jesus is not appealing to Jewish prejudice but was making the point that a believer who persists in impenitence is to be put out of the church and treated as an unbelieving, unrepentant outsider.

When a church has done everything it can, but without success, to bring a sinning member back to purity of life, that brother is to be left to his sin and his shame. If he is truly a Christian, God will not cast Him away, but He may have to allow him to sink still deeper before he becomes desperate enough to turn from his evil.

V. The Authority for Discipline (vv.18-20)

“Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. “Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”

The work of discipline should be undertaken with the greatest care. Done in the wrong way or in the wrong spirit can do great damage by fostering self-righteousness and legalism, just as discipline not done at all causes great damage by allowing sin’s influence to spread like leaven.

Jesus’ promises in verses 18 and 19 have suffered serious misinterpretation throughout the history of the church, the most extreme being the Roman Catholic doctrine that the church has the divine authority to forgive sin.

Many charismatics use these promises – along with others, such as those of Matthew 7:7 and 21:22 – to claim from God every imaginable blessing and privilege just for the asking.

But in the light of the context of what Jesus had just said, in the light of common rabbinical expressions of that day, and in the light of the grammatical construction of the text, it is clear that He was not teaching that God’s power can be bent to men’s will.

He was not saying that men can force heaven to do things.

Quite to the contrary, His promise was that when His people bend their wills to His, He will endorse and empower their act of obedience.

Jesus was here continuing His instruction of church discipline.

He was not speaking about petitioning God for special blessings or privileges, and even less was He teaching that the church or any of its leaders has power to absolve the sins of its members.

He was declaring that the church has a divine mandate to discipline its members when they refuse to repent.

A. What the Rabbis Spoke

The rabbis sometimes spoke of a principle or action as being “bound in heaven” or “loosed in heaven” to indicate that it was forbidden or permitted in light of God’s Word.

A Jew of that day would have understood that Jesus did not mean that men could bend heaven’s will to their own but that God had an expressed principle with which the church must conform.

B. What Grammar is Saying

The grammatical construction in the passage also clarifies its meaning.

As in Matthew 16:19, “will be bound” and “will be loosed” translate future perfect passives and are more accurately rendered “Will have been bound” and “will have been loosed.”

The idea is not that God is compelled to conform to the church’s decisions but that, when the church follows Christ’s pattern for discipline, it conforms its decisions

to what God has already done and thereby receives heaven's approval and authority.

Perfect passives are also used in John 20:23 in regard to forgiving or retaining sins.

Believers have authority to declare that sins are either forgiven or not forgiven when that declaration is based on the teaching of God's Word.

If a person has received Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, the church can tell him with perfect confidence that his sins are loosed, that is, forgiven, because he has met God's condition for forgiveness, namely, trust in His Son.

If, on the other hand, a person refuses to receive Christ as Savior and acknowledge Him as Lord, the church can tell him with equal confidence that his sins are bound, that is, not forgiven, because he has not met God's condition for forgiveness.

C. What Jesus is Saying in Verses 18 and 20

1. Jesus first assures His people that the Father acts with them when they work to purify the Church

He says in verse 19: "Again I say to you that if two of you (referring back to the two witnesses of v.16) agree on earth concerning anything that they ask (in seeking the purity of the church), it will be done for them by My Father in heaven."

2. When the church acts in God's behalf and in accordance with His Word in matters dealing with sin, He acts in their behalf by confirming and

empowering their faithful decisions and actions

“Agree” is from *sumphoneo*, which literally means to sound together and is the term from which we get “symphony.”

If even *two* of Jesus’ followers are in agreement with each other that a sinning believer has either repented or refused to repent, they can be sure they are also in agreement with the “Father in heaven.”

3. Jesus also assures His people that He Himself acts with them when they work to purify the church (v.20)

“For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”

- a) This verse is also frequently misinterpreted, though not with such serious error as in the misinterpretation of the two previous verses
- b) To use this verse to claim the Lord’s presence at a small worship service or prayer meeting does not fit the context of church discipline. Jesus is always present with His people
- c) The context demands that the “two or three” are witnesses in the process of discipline
- d) Jesus says, “For where two or three are gathered together in My name,” does not mean to utter His name but to ask and to work according to His divine will and character

For the witnesses to have gathered in His

name is therefore for them to have faithfully performed their work of verifying the repentance or impenitence of a sinning brother or sister on the Lord's behalf. When the church gathers in the Lord's name and for His cause and glory, it must be engaged in self-purifying ministry under His power and authority, and with His heavenly confirmation and partnership.

CONCLUSION

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian of rather liberal persuasion who was caught in the terrors of Nazi Germany, wrote a book entitled "Life Together." In it he gives some profound insights into the need for restoring a sinning brother to the fellowship of the church.

"Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person. This can happen even in the midst of a pious community. In confession, the light of the gospel breaks into the darkness and seclusion of the heart. The sin must be brought into the light. The unexpressed must be openly spoken and acknowledged. All that is secret and hidden is made manifest. It is a hard struggle until the sin is openly admitted, but God breaks gates of brass and bars of iron (Ps. 107:16). Since the confession of sin is made in the presence of a Christian brother, the last stronghold of self-justification is abandoned. The sinner surrenders; he gives up all his evil. He gives his heart to God, and he finds the forgiveness of all his sin in the fellowship of Jesus Christ and his brother. The expressed,

acknowledged sin has lost all its power. It has been revealed and judged as sin. It can no longer tear the fellowship asunder. Now the fellowship bears the sin of the brother. He is no longer alone with his evil for he has cast off his sin from him. Now he stands in the fellowship of sinners who live by the grace of God and the cross of Jesus Christ. ... The sin concealed separated him from the fellowship, made all his apparent fellowship a sham; the sin confessed has helped him define true fellowship with the brethren in Jesus Christ.” ([New York: Harper & Row 1954], 112-13)

Will you take a few moments to examine yourself as we share together in the Lord’s Table?

If you are one who has found yourself guilty of a sin against another, will you confess and repent of it to Christ right now?

When we’re done this morning, if that persons here, will you go directly to him or her and privately seek reconciliation in light of our study of Matthew chapter 18?

Let’s pray together.