

The Commands of Christ

Sermon # 26

“When There is Trouble In the Family”

Matthew 18:15-20

To some the words “church discipline” are synonymous with punishment and harshness. Others simply avoid it at all costs, feeling that each person has the right to choose his own set of rights and wrongs with regard to personal conduct.

What we are going to look at tonight is one of those issues which we would dearly love not to have anything to do with. There are a number of good reasons this is true: (1) we have an aversion to confrontation; (2) we have distaste for it because we have seen the damage that is left when it is done wrong and (3) to accept the validity of church discipline is to admit that we too are vulnerable to falling and needing correction.

Dr. John MacArthur speaking about this subject said, *“...In many churches where there is no tolerance of sin in principle there is much tolerance for it in practice. And when preaching becomes separated from living, it becomes separated both from integrity and from spiritual and moral effectiveness. It promotes hypocrisy instead of holiness. Divorcing biblical teaching from daily living is compromise of the worst sort. It corrupts the church, grieves the Lord and dishonors His Word and His name.”* John MacArthur. *MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Matthew 16-23.* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988) p. 124]

FIRST, SOME COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS CONCERNING CHURCH DISCIPLINE.

There are some common misconceptions concerning church discipline. The first misconception is to view church discipline as a negative process. But in reality nothing should be further from that truth when discipline is done correctly.

A second misconception is that church discipline is *“kicking a person out of the church.”* Matthew 18 does say we are to treat the person as unsaved, which means a suspension of the person’s privileges as a church member, not the expulsion of their name from the church roll.

The third misconception is that church discipline is a means of vengeance or judging. Do we have the right to say that someone else has sinned? Are we not warned against judging others? Matthew 7:1 does indeed say, *“Judge not, that you be not judged.”* But although Matthew 7 does forbid us from judging one another’s “motives” it does not say that we can not make judgements about whether or not a person’s conduct is scriptural or not. Nor does it forbid civil judgment of the courts upon the wrong-doers.

SECONDLY, THE PROCESS OF CHURCH OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

There are five imperatives connected with these verses. Within the five commands found in this text the Lord sets out three steps of church discipline.

The first step in church discipline – A private confrontation.

The first two commands are found in verse fifteen. *"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."* In this verse the words "go" (*hupage*) to your brother and "tell him (*elenxon*) his fault" or literally reprove him, are both imperatives.

"Tell him his fault" comes from a Greek verb that means *"to bring to light"* or help him see his sin.

But who are those who are to do this work? Is the job of the pastor and the deacons? The New Testament nowhere says this. In some churches this completely left in the hands of the pastor, there is just no scriptural justification for this. This is not the duty of the pastor and the church leaders alone. It is the responsibility of any believer. Or if I can be even more bold? It is your duty. The responsibility for the discipline of those who stumble, rests squarely on the shoulders of church members.

The leadership does play a key role in determining the form of church discipline that is used. It can be anything from the removal of the person from a position or office, to full suspension of the privileges as a member. But the decision to use discipline and the responsibility and accountability that goes along with it, belong to each and every member of the congregation. You can't blame it on someone else.

Yet we must admit that the process of restoring a fallen Christian is a demanding responsibility. How will they respond? Is the whole thing just a rumor that I should ignore? After all it is not any of our business anyway, is it? When faced with the need to confront someone with their actions we often say, *"But I might offend him/her!"* What we really mean is that it might be unpleasant or that they might get upset with us. In such situations all our excuses about not wanting to be judgmental are just the feeble rationalizations of being scared.

Who is qualified to confront a sinning brother?

The Bible says, in Galatians 6:1, *"Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted."*

We have trouble with the requirement *"you are spiritual"* because we think it is the height of arrogance to think of our selves as "spiritual."

The problem is that we don't really understand what it means to be a spiritual person. I like what Dr John MacArthur says in regard to who are the spiritual. *"The fact is that whereas*

maturity is relative depending one's progression and growth, spirituality is an absolute reality that is unrelated to growth. At any point in the life of a Christian, from the moment of his salvation till his glorification, he is either spiritual, walking in the spirit or fleshly, walking in the deeds of the flesh.Any believer at any point in his growth toward Christlikeness, can be a spiritual believer who helps a sinful believer who has fallen..." [John MacArthur. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Galatians. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987) p. 177]

The qualifications drawn from the passage in Galatians would seem to be (1) a gentle loving spirit. (2) a love for the Lord and His church and (3) a person who is willing to confront sin in their own lives.

Let me read you something that I think speaks to our attitude as attempt restoration.

*"Think gently of the erring;
You know not of the power
With which the dark temptation came
In some unguarded hour;*

*You may not know how earnestly
They struggled, or how well,
Until the hour of weakness came
And sadly thus they fell.*

*Think gently of the erring;
Oh, do not now forget
However darkly stained by sin,
He is your brother yet;*

*Heir of the self-same heritage,
Child of the self-same God.
He has but stumbled in the path
Which you in weakness trod.*

*Speak gently to the erring;
You yet may lead them back,
With holy words and tones of love,
From misery's thorny track;*

*Forget not you have sometimes sinned,
And sinful yet may be;
Deal gently with the erring, then,
As God has dealt with thee.*

[J.A. Fletcher, "Grace at Work" - www.bible.org/illus/c/c-69.htm]

John Newton who wrote the song, "Amazing Grace" knew what it was to be utterly and completely in need of grace. He said, *"When people are right with God they are apt to be hard on themselves and easy on other people. But when they are not right with God they are easy on themselves and hard on others."*

Let me give you a few practical guidelines on how this should be done.

1. Do it soon. Don't put it off. Reproof should take place quickly, as soon as the offense is known.

2. Do it privately. It is no accident that we are told to go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. Something I have learned by doing it wrong. I believe it should be done face to face, if possible. Not by e-mail, not by phone or letter. Anything else places a barrier between the people involved. After giving this matter considerable thought I believe that Jesus had in mind a face to face conversation. Anything else robs us of the chance to read emotions, facial expressions and tone of voice.

3. Don't share it with others. That means that we do not go to our friends, or even our church family first, but rather to the person that has the problem. Often when we learn that someone is in sin we react by shunning them or by talking about them behind their back instead of quietly, privately confronting them with the problem. We need to recognize that gossip is a subtle snare; we all can be guilty of it. And even prayer can be a form of gossip, when we share more in a prayer request than we need too. It can become nothing more than a spiritual way of avoiding treating the matter with the confidentiality required by scripture. The beauty of the Lord instructions is that they avoid gossip. In fact gossip is so great an evil that in itself it calls for corrective church discipline. Nothing so poisons a fellowship like gossip.

4. Affirm the relationship. Remind the person that you are there because you care about them and your relationship with them. A good way to begin might be to say, *"I want to discuss something that may be difficult for both of us. But I value you as a friend and I am concerned about....?"*

5. Make observations not accusations. Tell them what you have seen, heard or felt. And ask for an explanation. This is much different in tone from accusing someone of wrongdoing.

6. Get the facts. Besides offering your own observations, about what you have seen, be sure to let the other person respond. When the other person is responding keep your ears open and your mouth shut. You may be missing or misunderstanding something.

7. Promote resolution. The point is not to win but to win back the fallen. The purpose of discipline is found in verse fifteen, it is to win back your brother or sister. In Galatians we are told to *"restore"* the fallen and the word restore is the same word for *"mending nets"* or for a surgeon *"setting a broken bone."*

The first step in church discipline – A private confrontation and...

The second step in church discipline – take witnesses. and the next command are found in verse sixteen, in the word “take” (paralabe) witnesses with you. "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.'" So why are these other witnesses needed? It provides a wider perspective on the problem, it may provide added objectivity, and so that there are witnesses as to what is said and what was not said. The importance of taking witnesses is not simply a matter of fulfilling the letter of the law, nor is it to merely apply more pressure to repent to the one who has sinned. Rather it is to establish every word that is said with the hope that when confronted the sinner will listen and not be lost to the family relationship as a brother or sister in Christ.

Occasionally a person will not receive correction. Sometimes the individual will deny everything, or even verbally attack the messenger. He may dismiss it as a minor offense, or tell you it has been exaggerated or offer excuses for his behavior. Sometimes this happens even after everything has been done right! What then?

If it does simply offer an apology for any offense given and simply withdraw and let the Holy Spirit do His work. The whole purpose of restoration is to get the person back to where he or she was prior to the fall. That does not mean that should the person repent that they are immediately restored to leadership responsibilities in the church as if nothing had ever happened.

The second step in church discipline – take witnesses and....

The third step in church discipline and the next command is found in verse seventeen in the word “tell” (eipe) it to the church. The last command is found in second half of verse seventeen “let him be” (esto) considered as on to be won. "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." There is a place for the church to disassociate with a brother or sister over their conduct such a case is given in 1 Corinthians. In this case someone was actually sleeping with his father's wife. The problem was two-fold, (1) the person was completely unrepentant and (2) the church was proud of the “tolerance” they were showing to this situation. This person was still attending church and the church need to disassociate itself from this man and his sin. Today it seems that by and large people who are guilty do their own disassociating from the church.

FINALLY, THE AUTHORITY FOR CHURCH DISCIPLINE (vv.18-20)

Verse eighteen says, "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." This is not talking about as Roman Catholic church interprets this verse, that the church has the

authority to pardon sin. It is not talking about the ability of believers to claim special blessings and privileges, just “name it and claim it,” as some

Charismatics do. When it says that “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven” is not saying that God is compelled to conform to the church’s decisions, but rather that when the church follows the Lord’s instructions for discipline, it conforms its decisions to what God has already decided and thereby receives Heaven’s approval and authority.

This is further amplified in verse nineteen and twenty, *“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.(20) “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”* The word “agree” is from a word, which literally means “to sound together” and it is a term from which we get “symphony.”

In closing it should not be forgotten that, *“Corrective church discipline begins with the recognition that sin produces alienation. It devotes itself to overcoming that alienation. But if it fails in its objective, the church, like the father in the story of the prodigal son, never ceases to long for and to wait for the return of the prodigal. And when the prodigal returns its delight knows no bounds.”* [John White and Ken Blue. *Healing the Wounded: The Costly Love of Church Discipline.* (Downer’s Grove: Illinois, InterVarsity Press, 1985) p. 101]