

# The Purpose and Practice of Church Discipline – Part 1

Matthew 18:15-17, 1 Corinthians 5.1-5

March 23, 2014

## **Introduction:**

In 21<sup>st</sup> century America, we have many cultural values we embrace: we value freedom and liberty, individualism and patriotism, capitalism and democracy. But there's one cultural value that has over the past few decades risen to prominence and that is *tolerance*. Today there's little higher praise of an individual than to describe him or her as "tolerant" and nothing more dreaded than the cultural scarlet letter of being referred to as "intolerant."

Now to a certain extent tolerance is a very good thing. Our country has a long history of a great deal of intolerance, especially toward those of different races or religious backgrounds. If nothing else, we should be thankful for how much our country has improved in this regard. That we've become more tolerant towards those different from us is a vast improvement from where we've been historically.

But the problem I fear is that the pendulum has swung too far. We've become so "tolerant" of just about anything that the only thing we aren't tolerant of is "intolerance." Should any one dare make an evaluative comment that disagrees with another's lifestyle choice or their position on any number of topics, they're immediately labeled "intolerant" along with other less-than-flattering titles. Since no one wants to be considered "intolerant," rather than risk the label, we take the easy route and either capitulate to the new cultural norms or simply keep silent and not do anything that might rock the boat.

Sadly, such a radicalized version of tolerance has seeped into the church. Though God's Word calls us to make evaluative judgments on those in the church, to confront those in sin, and to even remove unrepentant members, we're reluctant to do so. It is far easier to just look the other way and to not cast any stones or make any unnecessary waves in the church by simply tolerating whoever and whatever. We may not like their behavior, but we collectively shrug our shoulders and exclaim, "Oh well, whatcha gonna do?" After all, isn't the church supposed to be a place of love and acceptance? Shouldn't we of all people be the most tolerant of all? Isn't being judgmental the last thing a church should do?

Because our cultural value of tolerance has uncritically seeped into the church, the subject we'll be studying over the next couple of weeks can be difficult for some. We're going to be discussing church discipline. Three weeks ago we started this short sermon series entitled *Church Membership Matters*. During these past three weeks considered the biblical foundations for church membership, the purpose of church membership, and requirements of members. One of the most important things I hope we've learned is church membership is a church's formal affirmation of one's profession of faith. Through church membership the church is saying to the world, "We believe this person represents Christ. We believe he or she is a child of God whose beliefs and actions are consistent with being a Christian." So church membership is church's a formal declaration to the world affirming an individual's profession of faith.

This morning we're in essence going to answer the question of, "What should a church do when it can no longer affirm a member's profession of faith? How is the church to respond to a member who no longer believes essential doctrines of the faith or is living in on-going unrepentant sin?" The answer, in short, is it needs to practice church discipline. Now for some, this topic may irritate you like fingernails scraped across a chalkboard, because it seems intolerant because it comes across as harsh and judgmental. Nevertheless, it is biblical. God has called the local church to practice church discipline and therefore we must do it, even if it goes against today's cultural grain.

To that end, we're going to focus our attention over the next couple of weeks on two passages of Scripture: Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5. So without further ado, would you please open your Bibles with me to Matthew 18, in particular to v. 15-17, where Jesus lays out the process of church discipline. Jesus says there, **"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."**

## The Practice of Church Discipline

Jesus gives us an outline of how church discipline should be practiced. When someone sins against you directly, or if you learn that a fellow member is engaging in some kind of sinful behavior, Jesus says a number of steps should be taken, the first of which is...

### 1. Speak to the individual privately.

If you have concerns about a fellow believer in the church, then you need to arrange a private meeting with him. Jesus says, **"Go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone."** Hopefully this kind of informal church discipline happens all the time here. I hope we're willing to gently confront each other regarding our sins. People do that for me. My elder board confronts me and that's a good thing: I've become a better pastor because they have been willing to point out my flaws and sinful attitudes. Some of you have done that personally to me: you've come to me because I said or did something that was out of line and you called it to my attention. This type of church discipline should be a normal part of being a member. We should not only encourage each other but also confront and rebuke each other as needed. To grow in our sanctification we need people who will come to us and challenge us. That's a good thing.

Let me say that if someone does this to you, in that they want to talk with you about a sin area they see in your life, be open to it. Because of our culture, it's really hard to muster up the courage to confront someone about sin, so if they're willing to do it, you need to be open and humble to hear it. I have found that when people confront me about sin in my life, they're almost always right. I have learned I need to not put the wall of defensiveness up and instead listen and humbly receive what's being said to me. So that's the first step: privately going to an individual and gently confronting them about their sin.

But sometimes that doesn't do the trick and it becomes necessary to move to the second step, which is to...

## 2. Bring other witnesses with you

Hopefully the situation can be resolved at the first meeting. Either the person will admit his sin and ask for forgiveness or it will be revealed there was a misunderstanding that can be cleared up once both individuals have the opportunity to sit down and discuss it. So Jesus says, **"If he listens to you, you have gained your brother."** But what if there is a clear issue of sin and the person refuses to hear it. What then? Jesus says in v. 16, **"But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses."**

There are times when a one-on-one meeting will not resolve the problem and a second step will be necessary. There may still be misunderstandings that cannot be resolved by the two individuals so it is helpful to invite one or two others who were witnesses to be involved. As much as possible, these other witnesses should be able to confirm the sin being addressed. Of course, sometimes there are no other witnesses because the sin in question took place in private. In this case, it is still worthwhile to include others in the process to help serve as objective third party. Perhaps you were misreading the situation; those other people might be able to point that out to you. Those who serve as witnesses in such a case should be individuals who are known to have sound judgment and don't have a vested interest in taking one person's side over another. One should be careful not to give the impression that you're trying to "gang up" on the other person.

Once again, this is pretty informal and ideally will help bring the person to repentance. It may be that one person is seeing things wrong, but if others also are seeing the same sin in my life, then that really should cause me to pause and reflect. There is strength in numbers, and so Jesus calls us to bring one or two others to bring a greater strength of witness in order to help the individual see their sin and repent of it.

Now these first two steps are what we would call *informal* church discipline. This kind of loving confrontation about sin should be happening between believers all the time. The elders or pastors don't need to be involved in each situation: it should be a normal part of our informal conversations and get-togethers with one another. Hopefully if we are all serving each other in this way, personal sins will be dealt with and we'll be helping each other to grow in righteousness. I hope this is what we each would do as a normal part of our fellowship here at Grace Fellowship.

But occasionally, and hopefully rarely, the person refuses to repent even after repeated attempts to show him his sin. Individual meetings and small group interventions have repeatedly met with resistance and unrepentance. Then at that point, it may become necessary to move on to the third step of church discipline, which is...

### 3. Bring the situation before the whole church

At this point, church discipline has moved from informal to formal church discipline because now it becomes necessary to bring the situation before the entire church membership. Thus Jesus says in v. 17, **“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.”** During such a gathering, the individual should be present. If he’s unwilling to attend because he has chosen to persist in his sin, then the church membership should still meet without him and the facts of the situation be presented. The goal of this is to bring the entire weight of the church family into play in order to help the individual see that his sin is serious. It’s one thing to have one person tell me I’m in sin but they might be wrong. It adds a lot more weight to be told I’m sinning by two or three people. But if the entire church membership is coming to me and calling me to repentance, I ought to take notice! That means this really is serious.

So what this means is that a special meeting of church members is called, the nature of the unrepentant sin is explained, and encouragement is made to all the members to do their part in helping the sinning member to see his or her sin. Then time is given for the church to do just that: to go to that individual and lovingly confront him about his sin. The goal is the same since the process of church discipline started: to help the sinning member see his sin and repent of it, both for his good and the good of the church.

But if even this doesn’t work to bring about repentance, there is one more final step that must be followed, so step four is to...

### 4. Remove the individual from the church fellowship

Look at what Jesus says in v. 17, **“And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”** If after following these three steps there is still no repentance, the individual should be removed from membership and be treated by others in the church as if he were not a Christian. The reason for this is that by persisting in sin after numerous confrontations by others, the evidence suggests he’s not a genuine believer. Scripture is clear that Christians won’t continue in a pattern of unbroken, unrepented sin. As a result, since the church can no longer affirm his profession of faith on the basis of his works, they need to remove him from membership. Since church membership is an affirmation of one’s faith, one must be removed from membership when the church can no longer in good conscience affirm that person due to on-going, unrepentant sin that has been repeatedly confronted.

Now while this is a proper response of the church to a sinful member, it must be said that this is not meant to be a vindictive action. If bringing a person before the church does not lead them to repentance, there can only be grieving and sorrow for the one who is held fast in the grip of Satan’s lies. It’s difficult to break fellowship with someone you’ve considered a trusted friend and fellow Christian, so all who knew the individual will grieve and be sad as a result of church discipline. Yet this is what is necessary to show him the gravity of his sin and the effect it has upon his relationships with others. Nevertheless, while Jesus requires us to cease our fellowship with such an individual,

we should certainly continue to pray for him, asking God to lead him to repentance so that he might be restored. And by “ceasing our fellowship” with him, I don’t mean we treat him harshly or are rude or mean to him. It means that instead of treating him as a fellow believer, we treat him as we would an unbeliever: we call him to repent of sin and trust in Christ. We pray for him. We strive to proclaim the gospel to him and plead with him to turn from wickedness and return to Christ and the church. It’s an response to win the individual back, not coldly ostracize or shun him.

Now that’s the basics of the process of church discipline, a process we should all be engaged in, especially in the first two steps where the process is informal. Members of a healthy church should be practicing the first two steps all the time. But there may be times when we have to move from informal to formal church discipline and that will involve all of us collectively as a church, both to work together to confront the sinning member and, if it comes to it, removing them from membership. Thankfully, those times where we need to move to the third and fourth steps should be rare, but if we must, we all must be willing to do so since it’s what Jesus commands his church to do.

### **The Purpose of Church Discipline**

Moving on now from Matthew 18, I want us to skip ahead in our Bibles to 1 Corinthians 5. In this passage, Paul is instructing the church on how to practice formal church discipline. Most of the time informal church discipline such as Jesus talked about in the first two steps should work well in a church, but in case it doesn’t and even after the whole church gets involved the member is still unrepentant, Paul instructs us on what needs to be done. So if you would please follow along as I read just v. 1-5 of 1 Corinthians 5. Paul writes, **“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I’ve already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”**

As you can see, the Corinthians were facing a situation where a man in their church was sleeping with his stepmom. This was a clear case of sexual immorality, one that even the pagans didn’t tolerate, yet the Corinthians had done nothing about it. In fact, worse than doing nothing about it, Paul writes in v. 2, **“And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.”** Perhaps they were priding themselves on how open and tolerant they were, how they were going to welcome everyone, regardless of what they’ve done or were currently doing.

Needless to say, Paul does not share their optimistic appraisal of the situation. Instead of arrogance, they should be mourning; instead of tolerance, they should be taking action and removing this man from the church. So he tells them in v. 4 to practice the fourth step of church discipline that Jesus talked about in Matthew 18. He says to them, **“When you are**

**assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”**

So Paul says the next time the church is assembled together they're to carry out formal church discipline. They're to **“deliver this man to Satan”** which is simply to say they were to expel him from the church. By being removed from the church this man was being put back out into the world where Satan holds sway. No longer would he enjoy the benefit of hearing the preaching of God's Word, the affirmation of Christ's love for him in the bread and the wine of communion, or the encouragement of his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Now he'd be forced to be outside the church and be vulnerable to the lies and deceptions of Satan without the support of the church to help him.

Needless to say, church discipline as Paul describes it here is a very serious matter that he fully expects the church in Corinth to practice. He doesn't let them off the hook; expelling a sinning member from the church is an action Paul requires them to do, and what is true for the church in the first century is no less true for the church in the twenty-first century. The church is responsible for practicing church discipline on sinning members.

Now there's a couple of points of application I'd like to draw your attention to from these five verses that I think are important for us to understand if we're going to think about formal church discipline correctly. One application has to do with us when we as the church have the responsibility to practice church discipline and the second with what it is meant to accomplish in the life of the individual being disciplined. So the first is this...

### **1. Church discipline should cause us to feel sorrowful.**

Paul scolds the church in Corinth in v. 2 for having the wrong attitude. He says, **“And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn?”** This wasn't a time for boasting; they should have been deeply saddened by the fact that a member of the church was living in on-going, flagrant sin. Instead of enjoying fellowship with this individual, they should have removed him from their midst and broke off their relationship with him. They should have been in mourning over this, not celebrating it.

Should there come a time when we need to practice church discipline on a member of our church, it will not be done with any delight on my part or the part of any of the elders. There is nothing enjoyable about removing someone from the church and breaking off fellowship with them. Should we need to practice church discipline, it'll be accompanied with many tears and great sorrow for two reasons. First, we will mourn the loss of a friendship. As Paul will mention at the end of chapter 5, we aren't even to associate with those who have been expelled from the church by church discipline. That can be especially difficult if you were close friends with the individual because it effectively terminates the friendship. There's a real sense of loss the church should feel when a fellow church member has to be removed from the church through church discipline.

But besides sorrow for our own relational loss, there will be sorrow because of what church discipline means for the individual being disciplined. The whole reason church

discipline is being administered is because the individual is acting in a way inconsistent with his or her profession of faith. Though they may claim to be a Christian, their fruit is such that the church can no longer affirm their profession of faith as valid. Through formal church discipline the entire church says in effect, "We do not believe you are a genuine believer. Since you must be a Christian in order to be a member of the church, we can no longer recognize you as a member because we do not believe by virtue of your on-going unrepentant sinful behavior that you really are a Christian."

Now this is not to say the individual is not a Christian or has lost his or her salvation. No one can say that authoritatively except God himself. But every church must judge a tree by its fruits. Church discipline says to the individual, "As far as we can tell, because you are living in unrepentant sin, we cannot continue to treat you like a Christian. It would be wrong for us to give you a false sense of security by allowing you to remain a member; in love, we need to demonstrate just how serious your sinful choices are by removing you from the church fellowship. We hope that you repent, but until then, we must treat you in a manner consistent with your behavior. If you act like an unbeliever, we have no choice but to treat you as an unbeliever, which means expelling you from the church."

We all should mourn when we have to call a spade a spade and say to someone we care about that we do not believe their profession of faith is valid. To think this individual we once regarded as a genuine believer may in fact be turning his or her back on God by continuing in unrepentant sin or false doctrine and choosing the broad and wide road to destruction is a reason to shed tears. Church discipline is the single most difficult thing a church needs to do, but do it we must, out of love for God and love for the individual, even if it means great sorrow and mourning for us.

But there's also something we must be careful not to miss regarding the purpose of formal church discipline for the one being disciplined, and that is...

## 2. Church discipline is redemptive, not retributive.

Look again at what Paul says in v. 5, "**...you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.**" There are two purposes for church discipline, with the first one leading to the second. First, Paul says the reason they are to remove the man from the church is "**for the destruction of the flesh.**" Paul is not saying he expects the individual to be destroyed, only that his "**flesh**" would be destroyed, which is Paul's way of speaking of the man's sinful nature. The idea is that if the man is removed from the church, he'll be back out in the world completely separated from Christian fellowship. He then will taste the bitter fruits of his sinful choices which will hopefully be so terrible to him that he will turn from his sinful ways. The goal is that he might "put to death" his sinful desires as a result.

If so, this will lead to the second purpose of church discipline that Paul mentions at the end of v. 5, "**...so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.**" Paul tells the church to practice church discipline because it can save his soul. This is similar to what James says in James 5:19-20. "*My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from*

*his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.*” That’s what church discipline does: it’s the final attempt of God’s people to call a member back to the obedience that comes from faith. It’s an act of redemption, not retribution.

I know in our ever-so tolerant age church discipline appears to be grossly intolerant. We think to ourselves, “Who do these people think they are, kicking this person out of the church? They’re so judgmental and self-righteous. Why can’t they be more loving and accepting?” But ironically church discipline is the most loving thing a church can do for a professing believer who refuses to repent of sin. Through church discipline, God’s people say, “We love you so much we’ll do whatever it takes to call you back to Christ. If it means we have to expel you from the church, break off fellowship with you, and treat you like an unbeliever in order to impress upon you the grievous nature of your sin and the great spiritual peril you are in, then we’re willing to do that.”

It is churches that are unwilling to practice church discipline who are unloving. When a church is willing to overlook on-going sin in the life of one of its members and instead treats him or her like a fellow Christian as if nothing is out of place, then that is at best an act of cowardice and at worse an act of sheer hatred. If a man stands in the middle of train tracks while an Amtrak is barreling right towards him, you don’t show him love by talking about how the Chicago Cubs pitching roster looks for this season. You shout and wave to get his attention, imploring him to get off the tracks before it’s too late. A church that isn’t willing to practice church discipline is the most loveless church of all because it is willing to ignore sin all for the sake of saving face and keeping the peace. We are to practice church discipline not because we’re judgmental or because we want to get back at someone who wronged us: we are to practice church discipline because we wish to see sinners repent of sin and find healing and forgiveness in Christ.

## **Conclusion**

So as I close, I hope it’s clear to you from this passage that church discipline is something Scripture clearly expects the church to practice. Though it may appear intolerant to the eyes of the world, and it is admittedly difficult to do especially when it involves people we care about, nevertheless it is what we’re called to do on occasions as a church. While I hope I will never need to have to lead us through such a process as your pastor, I think it is important that we each be willing to commit ourselves to it if the need ever arises. We need to be obedient to God’s Word, even if it is difficult to do and even if the world might label us intolerant for doing so. But in so doing, we do it out of great sorrow in our hearts, a great love for the individual, and with a great hope for their repentance and restoration. We may need to remove a sinning member for a time, but the goal is always to welcome them back in. Until such time, the church responds with prayer, with the gospel, and the biblical kind of tough love that God uses to draw the sinning rebel back to him.

Please make sure you come back next week as we cover part 2 what Paul has to teach us about church discipline from the rest of 1 Corinthians 5. Let’s pray.

**This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship Church of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2014.**