

# | Church Discipline|

*Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*

*Colossians 3:12-14*

## **Fight like Family**

We have been made into a new family through Christ. The church is a group of busted sinners, saved by grace, and called to walk deeply through life with one another. Because of this, your group is going to hurt one another through sin. If you do not, it is likely that you are simply not spending enough time together. In your group, there is going to be frustration, annoyance, hurt feelings, bitterness, gossip, slander, envy, and pride. In short, there is going to be sin.

We are family, and when we disagree or hurt one another, we fight for each other. This means we don't let anything come between us. We bear with one another and forgive one another. Nothing will stop us from being family, and like a fight with a brother or sister, you need to get over it and forgive because that's what family does. Whether we sinned against them or they sinned against us, the responsibility to begin the conversation always falls on us (Matt 5:23-24, Matt 18:15-17).

We do not put up with unrepentant, relational sin. This has no place among a gospel-centered people. When there is conflict, we are called to talk *to* one another, not *about* one another. As a group leader, your role is to help others see this and know that the gospel not only allows them to be reconciled, but calls them to it as well.

## **Church Discipline**

As Christians, we address sin in one another. We are to walk deeply in life with each other so that we can see one another at our best and our worst. As we see sin in one another or are sinned against, Jesus has given us a guide in Matthew 18 for walking through sin and reconciliation as his people.

Take a minute to read through this passage and discuss the process outlined for approaching sin in the church.

“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. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.

For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”  
Matthew 18:15-20

Church discipline is the process by which we hold brothers and sisters in our church family accountable so that they might not pursue unrepentant sin and stray from following Jesus. Jesus lays how to do this in Matthew 18 (above).

Given the outline in Matthew 18 for dealing with sin in the church, step one is always to speak directly with the person who has committed sin. Speaking with a third party is never step one. Therefore, if someone is speaking with you or anyone else about an issue they have with another, our immediate assumption has to be “They already spoke with this person and it did not go well.” So, our appropriate response is, “What did they say when you talked to them about this?” If they have not talked to them yet, direct them to step one. This is how we keep gossip, division, and relational weirdness out of the process.

Our goal is to help reconciliation take place. In our sinful nature, we often avoid directly discussing issues with one another. We often do not know how to handle conflict well and think that addressing it head on will make it worse, choosing rather to slowly form a grudge, gossip to others, and change their attitude and interactions with the one that they hurt or that hurt them. This natural response is a bad one. At times, this means you will have to realize that too much time has passed and you will need to arrange the meeting and be present to help moderate so that what needs to be said is said, and they can begin to work towards forgiveness and unity.

Upon examination of the context of this passage in Matthew it is clear that the goal of this process is reconciliation and the intent of those walking in it is for forgiveness and restoration. Sometimes, however, this desired result is not reached. When someone refuses to repent as they are approached one on one and then by several church family members, the conflict is then “taken to the church”. When we do this, we get pastors involved who help address the individual in their unrepentant sin.

If it is clear that they are unrepentant and they do not want to listen to their brothers/sisters or their pastors, then the most painful part of this process is the final step- excommunication or disfellowship. The pastors let the wayward brother or sister know that they are walking in unrepentant sin, they are acting like an unbeliever, and they are only welcome back into fellowship if repentance occurs.

Jesus commands this, and we can see one clear example of this in the New Testament church. In the church of Corinth, there was a situation where a man had a sexual relationship with his stepmother. Once Paul discovered that this was not being addressed, he called them to excommunicate this church member in 1 Corinthians 5:

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. Your boasting is not good. Do you not

know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. ... For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you." (1 Corinthians 5:4-7;12-13)

The reason this is important is twofold: the protection of the church and the last effort to bring about repentance in a wayward brother or sister. Paul says a little sin (he gives the example of leaven) can change the whole church. When we become complacent with unrepentant sin, we will accept it as the norm and this is dangerous.

Paul gives the second reason, that they would be delivered over to Satan for the destruction of their flesh. This is just like the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. The hope is that in being delivered over to Satan and to the world, they would experience the result of pursuing sin- hopelessness and lostness. And in the destruction of the flesh, they might repent and be saved from judgment.

This is a difficult process, but this is what we hope for in church discipline. It is certainly an unpopular stance to a culture that has wrongly defined love as blind acceptance of another's poor choices. But the Bible makes it clear, the most loving thing you can do is to stand between a wayward brother and hell, and practice church discipline. True love is a painful sacrifice like this, because ultimately, it could save their soul.