**Theology of the Church – Core Seminar**

**Class #3 – Church Discipline**

**Introduction**

Is God’s love incompatible with God’s discipline?

If God allows pain in our lives, does that mean that He hates us?

Certainly not. The writer of Hebrews explains in chapter 12**, “And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.’ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?”** **(Hebrews 12:5–7)**

Here, God’s discipline is seen as an *expression* of His love; in fact, it’s one of the markers that you are actually a child of God.

C.S. Lewis once said, “The problem of reconciling human suffering with the existence of a God who loves, is only insoluble so long as we attach trivial meaning to the word ‘love’[[1]](#footnote-1).”

God loves us to much to simply leave us where we are – that’s reflected in the gospel. His love is a *holy* love. What’s best for us is not to always get our way, but to have our way aligned with *His*.

We understand this in things like parenting, in education, and coaching. And yet when we come to the topic of *Church* discipline, many are quick to throw out the idea as *unloving, divisive,* and *unnecessary.* We love to talk about the idea of God’s grace and mercy. We like Jesus as Savior; but we struggle with Jesus as Lord – that to follow Him means *deny* ourselves.

No doubt, there are real stories of church discipline being unnecessarily divisive and unloving. But rather than throwing out Church Discipline because of bad examples, we need to once again turn to the Bible to consider what it says.

**What is Church Discipline?**

How many here have been disciplined by a church before?

Okay…let me ask that another way: How many here have ever been taught anything when at church?

That’s all of us. Church discipline can be *formative,* meaning you’re being taught something; or church discipline can be *corrective*. In the formative sense, you’re all under church discipline right now; and every church does this. But not every church does corrective discipline.

Now most corrective discipline happens on a small scale in personal relationships: one friend exhorting and encouraging another in love; the person receives the correction and walks more consistent as a Christian.

This should be normal and a regular part of every Christian’s life - to confess our sin to each other, live transparently and lovingly help each other follow Jesus.

It’s important to start here, because if this is *not* normal in a church’s culture, taking the next step of an act of formal church discipline, or excommunication, *seems* confusing or unloving. When it’s normal, God’s holy love is obvious, and Church discipline seen as an essential tool for the church.

Okay, so what then is church discipline (and from here on out, I refer to it in the formal sense of excommunication)?

Let’s revisit two important texts of Scripture to answer that question.

First, **Matthew 18:15–19 “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. 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. 17 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. 18 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. 19 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.”**

Someone is in sin – he’s confronted in private, but refuses to repent. Then by 2 or 3 witnesses, but refuses to repent. Then it’s brought before the church and he still refuses to repent, so he’s excluded or excommunicated – treated as a pagan or tax collector.

Second, consider **1 Corinthians 5:1–5 “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. 2 And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. 3 For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. 4 When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 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.”** And then skip to **v11: “But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. 12 For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? 13 God judges those outside. ‘Purge the evil person from among you.’”**

Here, Paul doesn’t tell them to warn the church, he simply announces judgment on the man and tells them to treat him no longer as a member of the church, but to hand him over to Satan. Then in **v12** Paul even calls it an act of judgment: “Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?” What is that all about?

Here’s our definition: church discipline is the act of excluding someone who professes to be a Christian from membership in the church and participation in the Lord’s Supper for serious unrepentant sin—sin they refuse to let go of. And typically, this is what people mean when they talk about church discipline. They mean ex-communion-ing.

**Why Should a Church Discipline?**

We can look at 1 Corinthians 5 and discern a number of purposes for church discipline:

1. *To expose sin* – sin grows in the dark and discipline exposes it for what it is that it might be removed (5:2)[[2]](#footnote-2)
2. *To warn* – the church does not enact God’s wrath toward sin, but it’s judgment acts as a dim picture and warning of the great judgment that is to come (5:5).
3. *To Save –* the aim of discipline is to wake the person up to the seriousness of sin. Note in 5:5 – Paul says, “deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, *that his spirit may be saved.*” In this church discipline is loving.
4. *To Protect ­–* in 5:6 Paul asks, “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” What’s he saying? As leaven spreads through the whole lump of dough, so sin (left unchecked) will spread through a church. If you’ve ever seen our church walk through a church discipline case, one thing that’s a consistent fruit is people examining their own lives and having a renewed sensitivity and hatred toward sin.
5. *To Preserve the Church’s Witness –* Notice in 5:1 that part of the shock is that the church was tolerating a sin that not even the pagans tolerated. Their witness was at risk of being ruined. The church’s task of drawing a clear line between the world and God’s people was lost if they didn’t enact church discipline!

**What Sins Require Church Discipline?**

Rather than making a list of sins that are disciplinable and ones that aren’t, it’s better to approach this by drawing principles from Scripture that guide us. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul calls the church to make a judgment (5:12) based on evidence. While God sees and knows all things, including the motives of our hearts, we are limited in our perspective. As a result, Scripture talks about us looking at the outward fruit of someone’s life (Matt. 7:16) but that assessment is not an omniscient one. As a result, a church should discipline for sins that are *outward, serious, and unrepentant.*

1. *Outward –* A church shouldn’t discipline someone every time they suspect is proud or greedy. For us to judge, we must be able to see or hear – in part, that’s why Jesus calls for two or three ‘witnesses’ in Matthew 18:16.
2. *Serious –* there needs to be a place in the life of the church where ‘love covers over a multitude of transgressions’ (1 Pet. 4:18). That’s not to belittle sin, but to recognize it is part of bearing up[[3]](#footnote-3) with one another as we seek to follow Christ.
3. *Unrepentant –* as Jesus lays out in Matthew 18, it’s when a person who professes Christ, but refuses to let go of the sin that they are liable for church discipline. Whether or not the person is repentant is what the church needs to try and determine; that lies at the heart of the issue.

**Who Should Lead the Process? What is our Job?**

With much could be said on this, let me see if I can summarize some basic ideas:

1. The process should include as few people as possible. That seems to be part of Jesus’ concern in Matthew 18: start one on one, then 2-3, and only after all that, then the church. So there are times where the nature of the sin calls for a more public response, but where that’s unnecessary, involve only those needed in the process of protecting the reputation of Christ and the well-being of the individual.
2. Church leaders should lead the process – In Galatians 6:1, Paul writes, “**if anyone is caught in any transgression, you *who are spiritual* should restore him.”** He recognizes the dangers that younger sheep may be more prone to in helping others face temptation. That’s not to say that the elders of the church are the only ones who are spiritual or should be involved, but in light of their responsibility to lead and give oversight to the congregation (1 Pet. 5:2), elders should play a role leading the process of what can be very challenging for the church and individuals involved.

So what role should members of the church play?

1. Strive to live transparent lives and speak the truth to one another in love – including times that call for rebuke and correction (Eph. 4:15, 2 Tim. 3:16). That’s part of loving each other and sharing God’s word with each other. Most corrective discipline happens on this level.

1. We should give information to the elders. These are the men the church has recognized to lead, teach and pray for the church. They often have a better picture of the whole of the church and information of what’s going on in the individual level.
2. Plead with the person in sin if you have an existing relationship with them. If you don’t know them already, it’s probably not the best time to start that friendship.
3. Pray. Even if you don’t know them well, pray for God to work in their lives and grant repentance.

**How Quickly Should We Act?**

How fast a church should act depends on how long it takes to determine characteristic unrepentance (‘characteristic’ in that it’s beginning to define them rather than it being an outlier data point for their life). So, for example in **Matthew 18**, the process could take some time for the three warnings to take place. **1 Corinthians 5** seems to be quicker in Paul pronouncing judgment and calling the church to remove the man. These two texts don’t illustrate that the church has two different approaches for different sins so much as they drop in on the process at different points. In 1 Corinthians 5 the whole church knew about the sin – one that they were arrogant about (5:2)! So the process of starting small and then adding warnings was not necessary – it was already public and characteristic unrepentance was already clear – so Paul called for excommunication.

One other example: In **Titus 3:10** Paul instructs that, **“As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him.”** So the example in Matthew has 3 warnings, 1 Corinthians 5 none, and here in Titus there are 2. Paul’s urgency seems to reflect his concern to protect the rest of the church, but again, the determining factor is how long does it take to determine characteristic unrepentance?

**Can a Pre-Emptive Resignation Avert Discipline?**

You can imagine a situation where someone is confronted with their sin, understand that they may face church discipline and then try to resign to avoid the shame of it.

Here’s the other question we need to think about to find an answer: Who does Jesus give the authority of the keys of the kingdom to in Matthew 16 and 18? *The Church!*

It’s the church who has the authority to represent heaven and take a member in (to bind) and to let a member go in good standing or for discipline (to loose).

**How do we Interact with Someone Who has been Disciplined?**

Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 5:11 “But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.”**

How are we to make sense of this?

1. I don’t think that means we physically exclude the person from attending church. Excommunication is barring a person from the Lord’s Supper which is intended to mark off those who are repenting of sin and trusting in Christ. But the church’s gathering is an opportunity for them to sit under the preaching of God’s word – we should welcome and encourage that in most circumstances.
2. When Paul says not even to eat with such a one – he’s not saying we should avoid our non-Christian friends. Far from it! Rather, to avoid the one who “bears the name of brother” and is in unrepentant sin. Love compels us to not act as if everything is okay – as in sharing a meal. A person’s soul is at stake so what should characterize our interaction with them is deliberate conversations about repentance.
3. What if the excommunicated person is a family member? I don’t think Paul’s words apply in that situation. Just as Peter and Paul have a category for living an unbelieving spouse[[4]](#footnote-4), a shared meal with a spouse does not have the same implication of a shared meal between friends.

**When and How Do we Restore Someone from Discipline?**

Just as discipline should take place when characteristic unrepentance can be determined, restoration should happen as soon as characteristic repentance can be determined. How long this takes will vary from situation to situation, but when it is determined, the church should restore the person, and forgive with no talk of probation or 2nd class citizenship.

One example of this is in

**2 Corinthians 2:5–11 “Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. 6 For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, 7 so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. 8 So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. 9 For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. 10 Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, 11 so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.”**

I find **v11** instructive. There are times whether individually or corporately, where forgiveness can be costly and difficult. But Paul encourages forgiveness not only because we have been forgiven ourselves (Eph. 4:32), but because he doesn’t want us to be outwitted by Satan. With unforgiveness, bitterness and anger and division are soon to follow.

If you were with us at our last members meeting you saw this beautifully on display. Not every case of discipline ends this way, but in this situation, the individual who was excommunicated was awakened to his situation. His grief produced a repentance and he was forgiven not only by God, but by our congregation. We’re told in Luke 15 that heaven celebrates with great joy at such repentance – and the relief, the joy, and the applause we heard that night was only fitting.

The hope is that in being careful with church membership and in practicing church discipline, we not only tell the truth to each other about our standing before God; but that we also tell the truth about God to a watching world.

**Discussion Questions**

1. **If a church does not have a history of practicing church discipline, what would be good to make sure is established *before* doing so?**

*Teaching on the gospel and subject of discipline, careful membership, private accountability, having church documents (covenant, statement of faith) that reflect the practice of discipline…*

1. *The Problem of Pain*, pg. 40 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also Hebrews 3:12-13; 1 John 1:5-10 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Col. 3:13 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 1 Pet. 3, 1 Cor. 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)