Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Dealing with Sin in the Church
Scripture: Matthew 18
Code: BQ122911

"And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And 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-gatherer." (Matthew 18:15–17)

God's desire for His children here on earth is purity of life. 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. 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).

Because God is so concerned for the holiness of His people, they should be equally concerned. The church cannot preach and teach a message it does not live and have any integrity before God, or even before the world. Yet in many churches where there is no tolerance for 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.

It is not surprising, therefore, that public discipline for sin is rare in the church today. Where there is little genuine desire for purity there will also be little desire to deal with impurity. The misinterpreted and misapplied statement of Jesus that we should not judge lest we be judged (Matt. 7:1) has been used to justify the tolerance of every sort of sin and false teaching. The ideas that every person's privacy is essentially to be protected and that each is responsible only to himself have engulfed much of the church. Under the guise of false love and spurious humility that refuse to hold others to account, many Christians are as dedicated as some unbelievers to the unbiblical notion of "live and let live" The church, however, is not nearly so careful not to gossip about someone's sinning as it is not to confront it and call for it to stop.

The Lord has always disciplined His people, and He has always instructed His people to discipline themselves. Old Testament believers were told not to "reject the discipline of the Lord, or loathe His reproof, for whom the Lord loves He reproves, even as a father, the son in whom he delights" (Prov.

3:11–12). Just as human fathers discipline their children out of love in order to make them better, so God does with His children. Human parents know that instruction to their children without enforcement is futile. Children not only must be told what is fight but must be led to do what is right, by correction, rebuke, and often punishment. “?He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently” (Prov. 13:24). Contrary to much popular thinking, even among Christians, it is not love but indifference that causes parents to allow their children’s misbehavior to go uncorrected. “Discipline your son while there is hope,” the writer of Proverbs wisely advises (19:18; cf. 22:15; 23:13).

It is an illusion to think that the church can take a strong verbal stand against sin without enforcing that stand among its own members and at the same time expect them to conform to God’s standards of holiness. Physical children do not respond to that approach in discipline, and neither do spiritual children. Because of the remaining sinfulness of the flesh, Christians still have a strong bent toward disobedience. Without enforcement of its standards, holiness will never flourish. That is why discipline is so essential to the spiritual well-being of a church.

The foolish, pretentious, and sometimes immoral actions of a few highly visible figures in the evangelical church today have caused evangelicalism to become a byword among many liberal Christians and in the world at large. Such lack of integrity is often rightly depicted as the epitome of religious superficiality, self-indulgence, and hypocrisy.

It is with the church’s responsibility to keep itself pure that Jesus deals in Matthew 18:15–20. 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). 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). He now declares that they must also be disciplined like little children.

In verses 15–20 Jesus presents five elements involved in godly discipline of sinning believers: the person who receives discipline, the person who initiates it, the purpose of it, the process and place for it, and the authority for it.

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