

The Disciplined Church

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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by John MacArthur

What is the single greatest contributor to the impact, growth, success, and stability of a church? Some people might tell you it's having a gifted pastor—someone who can rightly divide the Word of God, and do it in an engaging, enlightening, and entertaining way. Other people might tell you the most important thing is the music—you've got to engage people's emotions through song and sound to keep them coming back for more.

Or maybe the key is to have friendly greeters and hospitable church staff to make people feel welcome. Or perhaps the success of your church depends on the quality of your Sunday school classes, your children's ministries, or the in-home Bible studies. Some people might even tell you it comes down to the quality of the coffee you serve.

While every one of those aspects can figure into the popularity of your church, none of them guarantees biblical success like *church discipline*. You read that correctly—when it comes to growing a godly, biblical church, *purity* must be the first priority.

Purity was Christ's first priority with the disciples, as He laid the foundations of the church in His teaching. Matthew 18 is loaded with instructions and warnings about personal purity and how to keep sin out of the midst of God's people, starting in verse 6 where Jesus said this:

Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

That vivid, horrific imagery wasn't lost on His disciples—it was a clear message that sin was not to be trifled with or tolerated.

Paul was just as clear with his exhortations to the church at Corinth, warning them he would deal firmly with their sin and “not spare anyone” (2 Corinthians 13:2).

The Lord takes the purity of His people seriously, and we need to reflect His priority in our local congregations. When I first began preaching at Grace Community Church, we didn't practice church discipline—in fact, I'd never been to a church that did. It was a totally foreign concept to me, but Christ's instructions in Matthew 18:15-17 are clear.

If your brother sins, go and show him his fault 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. 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.

I hadn't seen it done before, but I became convinced it wasn't optional—that we were compelled to be obedient to Christ's model for church discipline.

At first, people told me it would kill the church—people wouldn't put up with that level of scrutiny in their lives, and they'd find somewhere less invasive to worship. In fact, the opposite has happened—Grace Church has *thrived* because God's people take sin seriously and don't tolerate it in their local congregation.

That's because the purpose of church discipline isn't to embarrass people by exposing their sin. On those occasions when the sinning man or woman refuses to repent and the elders need to bring the matter before the church, we don't take any delight in that. We're disappointed it's gone that far, and we want to see the person repent before he or she has to be put out of the church altogether. We don't do it because it's fun—we do it because it's the only way to keep sin from festering, taking root, and growing in our church.

We do it because it's vital to the spiritual health and the testimony of the church. Ignoring church discipline is the most visible and disastrous failure of the church in our time, because it conveys to the world that we're not really serious about sin.

The problem with the church today is not that it's out of step with the culture or it's too old fashioned. The problem is that it has lost its interest in holiness. It's not nearly concerned enough with maintaining its purity. Churches today have become content to be fellowships of independent members with minimal accountability to God and even less to each other. We have generations of pastors and church members today who have never experienced church discipline—they don't know anything about it.

And yet God's first priority for His people is that they be pure. If we're going to be useful to Him—as individuals and as local church bodies—we need to be united in our commitment to dealing directly and biblically with sin.

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