

Discerning Correction

Scripture: Matthew 18:15–18; 1 Corinthians 5:12–13

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Discernment is a critical need in the church today. [As we have already seen](#), it is required by both leaders and laymen alike for the exercise of godly judgment. It is vital in helping believers rightly inhabit and interact with the sinful world around us. Added to that, discernment is also necessary within the church as a means of correcting others and examining ourselves.

According to Scripture, we are supposed to judge one another with regard to overt acts of sin. Paul wrote, “Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves” (1 Corinthians 5:12–13). That speaks of the same process of discipline outlined by Jesus Himself in Matthew 18:15-18:

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. Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.

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 wants His people to be, above all else, holy, and that He is grieved by sin of any kind. Directly quoting God’s command to His covenant people, Israel, Peter wrote the same command to Christ’s church: “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (1 Peter 1:16; cf. Leviticus 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 unrepentant 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 to not judge lest we be judged (Matthew 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 person 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 church has always needed to confront the sins of its people. During its early days, many foreign visitors to Palestine were converted to Christ and decided to stay in or near Jerusalem in order to enjoy the fellowship of believers there. A large number of native Jewish converts were ostracized by their families and lost their jobs because of their new found faith. To help support those needy brothers and sisters—many of whom were virtually destitute—the believers who had property and possession sold them and gave the proceeds to the apostles, who “distributed to each, as any had need” (Acts 4:35). That practice was the spontaneous reaction of generous, Spirit-filled hearts to meet the practical needs of fellow Christians.

During that time, a couple named Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of their property and pledged to God that they would give all the proceeds to the apostles for use in the church. Somewhere in the process, however, they decided to keep back a portion of the pledged money for themselves. In order not to appear less generous than their fellow believers, however, they falsely reported that they were giving the full amount. When the Lord revealed the duplicity to Peter, he first confronted the husband.

“Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men, but to God.” And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last. (Acts 5:3-5, NASB)

Several hours later, Sapphira came to the apostles, not knowing what had happened to her husband. When Peter asked her if the property was sold for the price claimed by her husband, she confirmed his lie and suffered his fate. Not surprisingly, “great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things” (Acts 5:11, NASB).

The selfishness of Ananias and Sapphira was deplorable, but their great sin was in lying about what they had done, not only to the church but to God. In this particular case in the early church, God took discipline directly into His own hands and demonstrated before all how sin is to be dealt with by removing the offenders from the church (and from the earth!). The purity of the church was protected not only by making God’s people more fearful of sin but also by removing from the fellowship those who were not true believers (Acts 5:13).

Even in apostolic times, such direct and severe divine chastening apparently was rare. Scripture’s two main records of it are this case with Ananias and Sapphira, and Paul’s report that some of the Corinthian believers became weak, ill, and even died as a result of gross immorality and disregard for the sacredness of the Lord’s Table (1 Corinthians 11:30; cf. 1 John 5:16–17). God has not changed His attitude about sin or about purity. He is every bit as much concerned about the holiness of His people today as He was when the church was born. Sin has to be dealt with or it will destroy both those who practice it and those who tolerate it. While God may still act in supernatural ways to purge the church, He has primarily given that responsibility to the church itself. The church must be “self-policing” with regard to sin. The horrendous scandals that all too often occur tarnish the church, and reflect the abysmal failure of believers to confront sinning leaders and followers. The world often has had to expose what the church tried to cover up.

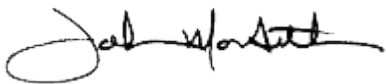
The Lord has always disciplined His people, and He has always instructed His people to discipline themselves. Old Testament believers were told not to “reject the discipline of the Lord or loathe His reproof, for whom the Lord loves He reproves, even as a father the son in whom he delights” (Proverbs 3:11–12). Just as human fathers discipline their children out of love in order to correct them, so God disciplines His children. Human parents know that instruction without enforcement is futile. Children not only must be told what is right but must be led to do what is right—by correction, rebuke, and often punishment. “He who withholds his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently” (Proverbs 13:24). Contrary to 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).

After quoting Proverbs 3:11–12, the writer of Hebrews says:

It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. (Hebrews 12:7–11)

The church that takes a strong verbal stand against sin without practicing discipline cannot expect its members to conform to God’s standards of holiness. Physical children generally 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 correction is so essential to the spiritual well-being of a church.

In this post we’ve looked at *external* correction whereby we examine others. Next time we’ll look at the *internal* correction required of every believer: honest, biblical self-examination.



(Adapted from *Reckless Faith* and *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Matthew 16-23*.)

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