

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

The Place and Purpose of Church Discipline

Scripture: Matthew 18:15–17

Code: B140820

Are you discouraged by disregarded sin in your church? Do leaders refuse to acknowledge or respond to reports of blatant sin within the church? You're not alone.

Many faithful churchgoers feel frustrated and helpless as they experience the ongoing damage inflicted by unrestrained and unrepentant sinners in their congregations. The passivity of many leaders is due to their desire to be seen as loving and to avoid potential conflict. This reluctance (or refusal) to confront wickedness is not only devastating to the health of a local church, it is also disobedient to Christ's clear commands.

Jesus gave explicit instructions on how sin in the church must be dealt with:

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. (Matthew 18:15–17)

The Place of Church Discipline

Notice that the Lord used the word “church” twice in verse 17. The Greek word is *ekklesia*, literally meaning “called-out ones.” The word is sometimes employed to speak of any assembly of people. An example of this would be Acts 7:38, which refers to the congregation of Israel during the Exodus as “the church in the wilderness” (KJV).

Some argue that since the discourse in Matthew 18 preceded Pentecost, Christ could not have been speaking of the New Testament church. But Jesus had already introduced the concept of the church to His disciples telling them that He would build it and hell could never overthrow it (Matthew 16:18). So the instructions in Matthew 18 were given in anticipation of the New Testament body of believers. It is hard to see how anyone could exempt the New Testament church from the principles set forth in this passage.

In fact, our Lord's whole point was that the assembly of God's redeemed people is the proper arena in which matters of dispute or discipline should be handled. There is no external court or higher authority on earth to which sin issues may be appealed (1 Corinthians 6:2–3).

It is by divine design that discipline should take place in the church. True believers are motivated by a genuine love for one another (1 John 3:14). In such a context, discipline may be administered in love, by loving fellow believers, for the genuine good and edification of the whole body.

The Purpose of Church Discipline

Discipline, properly administered, is always motivated by love. Its first purpose is the restoration of the sinning brother: “If he listens to you, you have won your brother” (Matthew 18:15). It also purifies the church as believers become more diligent to watch their lives and avert confrontation.

The goal of church discipline is not to throw people out, shun them, embarrass them, play God, be self-righteous, or exercise authority in an abusive manner. The purpose of discipline is to *bring people back into a right relationship with God and with the rest of the body*. Proper discipline is never administered as retaliation for someone’s sin. Restoration, not retribution, is always the goal.

This is obvious from the text of Matthew 18. The Greek word translated “won” in verse 15 is *kerdaino*, a word often used to speak of financial gain. Thus Christ portrayed the errant brother as a valuable treasure to be won back. That should be the perspective of every Christian who ever confronts a brother or sister about sin.

That is, in fact, the expression of God’s own heart with regard to discipline: He sees each soul as a treasure to be recovered. That is the whole context in which Christ spoke these words. The verses immediately preceding these instructions for discipline compare God to a loving shepherd, concerned for each lamb in the flock:

What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying? If it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray. So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish. (Matthew 18:12–14)

Every Christian must have that same sense of concern. It’s tempting sometimes to take the path of least resistance and avoid confrontation—especially when sin is already drawing a brother or sister away from the fellowship. But that is the very time when we *most* need to get involved. That is the heart of a true shepherd, who will go to any length to recover a missing or wounded sheep and restore him or her to the flock.

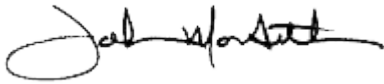
Confrontation is not easy, nor should it be. We’re not to be busybodies, constantly intruding into others’ business. But when we become aware that someone has sinned, we have a duty before God to lovingly confront that person. We cannot protest by saying it is none of our business. Once we become aware of a soul-threatening sin in a fellow believer’s life, it is our business to exhort, confront, and labor for purity in the fellowship of the church and victory in the life of the sinning one. These are noble and necessary concerns.

Nonetheless, we must be on guard against abuses and must keep the loving purposes of proper discipline in view at all times. There is a real danger of becoming too fond of chiding one another. Pride can poison the discipline process, just as it pollutes every virtue. That is why Jesus cautioned those who confront to examine themselves before trying to remove the speck from a brother’s eye. We must be sure we don’t have a log protruding from our own eye (Matthew 7:3–5)!

A person under discipline who refuses to repent is likely to feel abused and mistreated, just as

disobedient children sometimes despise the discipline of their parents. It is not at all unusual for an unrepentant person to accuse those who have confronted him of being unloving and unfair. That is all the more reason for those administering the discipline to take great care to act in love, with careful self-examination and great long-suffering.

Love does cover a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8) and there are certainly times when it is appropriate to graciously overlook sins committed by our brothers and sisters in Christ. But there are also times when sin in the camp demands confrontation and a call to repentance. But where is that dividing line and who is responsible to take action? We'll look at those issues in my next post.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John W. Stott". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

(Adapted from [*The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness*](#))

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