

Your Personal Responsibility in Church Discipline

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

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As we saw in my [previous article](#), Scripture is clear concerning the necessity and purpose of church discipline. Jesus granted the local church divine authority to administer that discipline (Matthew 18:15–20). But calling a sinner to repentance should always begin at an individual level before it ever escalates to the corporate setting of the church.

Confining Sin

Jesus made it clear that the discipline process should always begin with a one-on-one encounter: “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private” (Matthew 18:15). Discipline is not instituted by a committee. If the offender repents, there is no need to involve others at all.

Discipline, if successful, both suppresses the effects of sin and limits the circle of knowledge. Far from broadcasting knowledge of someone’s sin unnecessarily, the discipline process confines knowledge of the offense as much as possible. In most cases, if repentance occurs early enough in the process, no one but the offender and the person who confronts ever needs to know about the offense.

That personal and private confrontation prescribed in Matthew 18 also means that church discipline is the responsibility of every believer in the church. It is not something to be delegated to church officials. In fact, if you see a brother in sin, the *wrong* first response is to report his sin to church leaders, or to anyone else. “Go and show him his fault in private” (Matthew 18:15).

Too many Christians regard discipline as the exclusive domain of church elders, but that is simply not the case. The purity of the church is every Christian’s concern. The responsibility to confront sin that defiles the church lies with the first person to become aware of the sin. Don’t defer it to someone else. Don’t spread the circle of knowledge further than necessary. Furthermore, prayer for the sinning brother should never be used as an alternative to obeying Christ’s clear command to confront.

That command to confront the sinning brother leads us to another crucial question. What sins are grounds for the disciplinary procedure outlined in Matthew 18?

Restraining Effects

Put simply, church discipline is the necessary response to any offense that cannot be safely overlooked without harm to the offender or to the body of Christ. We need to be mindful of these parameters. Peter wrote to “keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8). Peter’s teaching was not in opposition to the discipline of unrepentant church members, but a reminder that Christians should overlook sins against themselves where

possible and always be ready to forgive insults and unkindness.

Matthew 18:15 has been rendered in various English translations with two slightly different senses. Most modern versions read, “If your brother sins, go and reprove him” or something similar. The *King James Version* says, “If thy brother shall trespass *against thee* . . .” (emphasis added). Ancient manuscripts differ on this point. Some include the expression “against thee”; others simply say, “If your brother sins,” implying that we should confront one another whether or not we are directly victimized by the sin.

The textual variation turns out to be relatively unimportant, however, when we realize that all sins warranting discipline are sins against the entire body of Christ. So whether the other person’s sin is *directly* “against thee” or only *indirectly* (because it is a sin that brings a reproach on the whole body), go and show him his fault in private.

Some examples of sins committed directly against you include: if someone attacks you physically in anger, steals from you, deceives you, or slanders you. The wrong response in such cases is to retaliate in kind, to return evil for evil, to hold a grudge, or to report the sin to others without having first gone to your brother. Love for him demands that your immediate response be private confrontation.

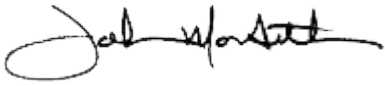
Indirect offenses against you include any sin that brings a reproach on the church. This includes sins that tend to draw the sinner away from the fellowship of believers—such as habitual worldly behavior, negligence of spiritual duties, sloth, or even doctrinal error. When a brother or sister is drawn away from our fellowship, the loss affects the whole body. So any sin that has the potential of causing such a loss is a sin that should be confronted.

Additionally, any sin that brings a reproach on the name of Christ is an indirect sin against us, because as Christ’s ambassadors we bear His reproach. If you observe a Christian brother in a morally compromising situation, you should confront him. Not being the recipient of the offense does not absolve you of your responsibility and obligation to confront your brother’s sin. That is precisely the sort of situation Paul rebuked the Corinthians for tolerating in their midst (1 Corinthians 5).

Even sins against non-Christians are subject to church discipline, because those sins dishonor Christ in the world’s eyes and thus bring a reproach that stains the entire fellowship. So *any* sin you observe is grounds for instituting the discipline—not just those sins by which you are directly victimized. In all such cases, your duty is the same: You must privately confront the offender.

Having said these things, it is important to remember what I stated earlier. Church discipline is the necessary response to any offense that cannot be safely overlooked without harm to the offender or to the body of Christ. We need to be mindful of these parameters. The goal of confrontation is repentance and the means of confrontation should always be done in the spirit of love, gentleness, patience, and grace. The last thing the church needs is an army of private detectives who see themselves as solely responsible to clear the church of all sin.

Unfortunately, private confrontation does not always result in repentance. It is for that reason that Jesus outlined four steps in the church discipline process. We’ll look at those next week.



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

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