

God's Work in Church Discipline

Scripture: Matthew 18:15–20

Code: B140904

Christ's teaching in Matthew 18:15–17 outlines clear instructions regarding the practice of church discipline. I've said it many times throughout this series, but it cannot be emphasized enough: Church discipline is always to be driven by the hope of restoring a straying brother—never out of derision or contempt. Love for Christ, His church, and one another requires that we treat sin with extreme prejudice, but we treat the sinning brother or sister with extreme love.

Loving a sinner who professes Christ means that we refuse to allow the cancer of sin to spread within and around him. Through a series of grace-filled, compassionate confrontations, we are to make every attempt to rescue him from self-deception and the snare of the devil. As we've seen, such an operation begins within the privacy of a one-on-one confrontation. If he refuses to repent, one or two more are to be brought into the circle. If he continues in his rebellion, the matter is to be brought before the congregation. Continued unrepentance will then culminate in excommunication. However, if at any point the sinner turns from his sin, the process is to stop and he is to be forgiven and reconciled. Such are the four steps described by Jesus.

God's Involvement in Discipline

But the Lord's instructions for protecting the purity of the church didn't end in verse 17. And while His subsequent statements are familiar to many churchgoers, the context of those statements is often forgotten or ignored:

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. Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst. (Matthew 18:18–20)

Those verses are often taken out of context and applied to prayer requests of every kind. But they specifically apply to the subject of church discipline. Jesus was teaching how God is at work in the process of church discipline.

"Whatever you bind" and "whatever you loose" refer to the church's verdict in a discipline case. *Binding* and *loosing* were rabbinical terms undoubtedly familiar to the disciples. They referred to the bondage of sin and to liberation from the guilt of it. Jesus was saying that heaven is in agreement with the church's verdict in a properly handled discipline case.

The verb tenses in the above quotation of Matthew 18:18 are literal renderings. The idea is not that heaven follows the church's lead, but that when discipline is correctly administered, whatever is done on earth has *already* been done in heaven. This is one of the requests in the Lord's Prayer: "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). If God's will is to be done on earth as it is in

heaven, the church must practice the proper discipline of sinning members.

This promise is meant as a comfort and encouragement. Too many people think it is unloving for the church to confront sin. But the truth is, when a church practices discipline as Christ commanded, that church is simply doing heaven's work on earth. They are loving the Savior and the sinner simultaneously.

Verse 19 is also often misunderstood. The Greek word translated “agree” is the same word from which the English word *symphony* is derived. It literally means “to produce a sound together.” Whether the verdict involves binding or loosing, when the church is in harmony—and especially the “two or three witnesses” who establish the fact that the sinning individual is unrepentant—the Father is also in agreement.

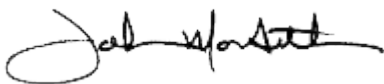
This verse does *not* mean that anytime you can get two people to agree on something, God has to honor their prayer request. The “two” in verse 19 are two witnesses whose testimony is in agreement. If they are also in agreement with God's will when they impose discipline on a sinning brother, they can be certain that God Himself is working in their midst and on their behalf.

Verse 20 reiterates a similar promise from Christ: “For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.” Not only is the Father acting in accord with us (Matthew 18:19), but the Son is participating as well (Matthew 18:20).

Although verse 20 is often cited to invoke Christ's presence at prayer meetings, that is a misinterpretation of the intent. God is omnipresent; so He is present whether one person is praying or fifty. But in this context the “two or three” refers back to the “two or three witnesses” of verse 16. And the verse speaks not merely of Christ's *presence*, but of His *participation* in the discipline process. He joins in the discipline carried out by the church—a fearsome reality for the individual who refuses to repent, but a rich comfort to those who must administer the discipline.

As we have seen throughout the church discipline process, the primary goal of all church discipline is to restore the sinning brother or sister. This goal is never abandoned, even after the individual has been excommunicated. And if at any time he repents, he is to be restored and welcomed with great love and compassion—lest we forget the great love and compassion that Christ extended to us in redemption.

While the process of church discipline can be painful and even heartbreaking, believers must remember that the purity of the church is a God-given priority, and that by following the pattern He gave us, we can have confidence that He is working in us and through us to accomplish His will.



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

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