

Worship (31) Corporate Worship – Church Discipline

We have seen that discipleship and fellowship are a part of corporate worship. There is a third part of this horizontal worship which serves almost like a bridge between fellowship and discipleship. It is also like a preservative for both fellowship and discipleship.

It is the practice of church discipline.

Now we may think of church discipline as a negative, unpleasant action which has little to do with worship as we often think of it. But in fact, church discipline is very much part of worship. Church discipline is worship for at least three reasons:

- 1) Church discipline seeks to uphold the name of God through the testimony of believers. The name of Christ is carried in this world by believers. The individual testimony of a Christian, and the corporate testimony of a church, reflects on Christ. And what church discipline seeks to do is to maintain the testimony of Christ through His people, individually and corporately. Church discipline serves as a motivator for believers to walk uprightly, knowing there is accountability and consequences if they do not. Church discipline restores Christians who are erring, to a place where the name of Christ is held high.
- 2) Church discipline upholds the purity of God's church. Church discipline makes known the holiness of God in a church. Judgement must begin in the house of God, and church discipline does this – we judge ourselves, and experience God's cleansing hand. As the holiness of God is known amongst us, it glorifies Him. It also reveals those who were never believers to begin with. It purges out false disciples, so that the name of Christ is held high, and the on-looking world can see a difference between themselves and believers.
- 3) Church discipline increases the spiritual health of individual Christians. We are motivated to obey, we are restored when we disobey; we are, in short, trained in righteousness.

It is both discipleship and fellowship. It is discipleship in that it ensures accountability to live like Christ; it is fellowship in that it restores erring people to fellowship. Likewise, it reveals who was never a disciple to begin with, and thus who was never in fellowship.

We think of this thing negatively, but it is a very positive thing. After all, discipline is simply training – it is part of our training in righteousness; to help others in righteousness. Is that a loving thing to do? It is one of the most unselfish, loving things you can do.

It will be perhaps the most misunderstood and ill-received thing you can do. Hopefully, in a church which understands accountability and church discipline, it becomes less misunderstood and more recognised for the life-giving tool it is. It is an uncaring church that lets its members graze in the pastures of sin, compromise, worldliness, false teaching and unwise choices.

Matthew 18:15-20

Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' ¹⁷ And if he refuses to hear

them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. ¹⁸ “Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ¹⁹ “Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven.” ²⁰ “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”

The context in **Matthew 18** has to do with forgiveness and restoration. That’s important. Church discipline is not punitive, it is corrective. It is not revenge, it is restoration. The goal in church discipline is to restore a true believer gone astray, or else to reveal a false believer in sheep’s clothing.

What begins the process?

‘... *if your brother sins against you*’. So the process begins if someone in some way sins against you and does not seek reconciliation. So it seems to suggest an act of personal offence. If someone sins against you in word or deed, what do you do? Lash out at them? Plan your revenge? Grumble and murmur? Begin a gossip chain and tell others how someone mistreated you? Jesus tells us what our response is to be: A personal, private meeting.

The word for ‘go’ literally means ‘retire or withdraw’. Set up a private, unseen meeting between you and your brother and sister. It must not only be unseen, but except in rare cases where prayer from a spiritual leader is needed, it should also be unknown. To tell others about your brother or sister’s sin is to disobey this command.

The words, ‘tell him his fault’ is literally, ‘admonish him’. The word is often translated ‘rebuke, reprove, convince or convict.’ But what should be the spirit of this meeting?

Galatians 6:1 tells us: ‘*Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.*’

Notice, the goal is restoration. Someone is overtaken – they are caught in a fault. They are out of fellowship with Christ, and thus with you. Your goal is to rescue them. Consider the difference between ‘rescue’ and ‘set straight’. Rescuing will be done in a spirit of meekness – doing whatever you can to bring this person back to an understanding of the truth and a right walk with God. You are not going to proudly denounce, or impatiently explode.

Rescuing will be done in humility, recognising you are not exempt from sin and could fall into the same temptation. There is a sensitive, considerate, humble, attitude.

Now the question is, for what sins do I take someone aside and admonish them? Jesus said – ‘if your brother sins against you.’ But in what ways do we sin against each other? We sin against each other each time we sin. Any time someone sins, they sin against Christ, and so they sin against the Body of Christ.

So, must we rebuke someone for any sin we see them do? No, because love is also willing to bear with the sins brought about by immaturity and ignorance.

The real key is what the person has done, and what their response to it has been. In other words, if their sin is something which has broken fellowship between them and you, and thus requires restoration – then you must do this. They have committed a sin which has placed them out of fellowship with God, and it appears they are either unaware of their sin or unrepentant of it.

That's why you must begin with a private meeting. A private meeting can clear up confusion – perhaps it was a perceived offence and not an actual one. Perhaps the person had no idea of the biblical standard, which doesn't mean they did not sin, by the way; but they can now act biblically. Maybe they knew it was sin and needed that human accountability to call them to repentance.

So in a way, we should expect this first stage to be happening fairly frequently – believers quietly, gently, carefully holding each other to the standard of Scripture.

The ideal situation is if he or she hears you - if he agrees with you, if he accepts your admonishment, you have won him, restored him. Notice – the emphasis is not on winning an argument – it is on restoring your brother or sister.

Luke 17:3-4 *Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. "And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him."*

As often as he sins and repents is as often as you forgive.

James 5:19-20 *Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sin.*

The Meeting in Plurality

But, if he fails to repent, to hear you – take one or two more with you.

How long before this stage? Enough time for someone to show fruits of repentance. Nothing in this Scripture forbids going to them again, pleading with them. There should be much ongoing prayer regarding this person and that God will grant them repentance, to the acknowledging of the truth.

The idea is you take one or two with you when it is obvious that your brother or sister is out of fellowship with you or the Lord, and refuses to repent or be reconciled. Now you take the witnesses.

What is the idea behind the witnesses? The purpose is the Old Testament law that a charge can only hold if two or three witnesses corroborate it. (**Deut 19:15**).

This is a protective measure for you and for the person being spoken to. It protects you from being accused of going about this in the wrong way, or having a wrong motive, or being vindictive and judgemental. And it protects the person being spoken to, if in fact they have done nothing wrong, so they are not declared guilty before they have even had a chance to explain their actions.

It is also a protection for pastors - **1 Tim 5:19** – ‘*Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses*’.

The witnesses are there to observe what you say to this person and how you say it. Was it according to the instructions in **Galatians 6:1**, or were they harsh, poorly chosen words? And they are there to observe the reactions of the other person. Is there flat out rejection and refusal to hear? Is there indifference? Is there a reasonable defence of their behaviour?

Group discipline/correction cannot occur on the testimony of one person.

Who are these witnesses? Who should you ask to accompany you? Ideally, two requirements:

- 1) Someone unbiased toward the situation. Don't take your best friend or spouse, or someone close to you whose objectivity is compromised by their friendship or loyalty to you.
- 2) Someone of spiritual understanding and maturity. Someone who does not have very much discernment is not an ideal witness. Someone whose senses are not well exercised to discern between good and evil should not be used as a witness. At the very minimum – someone who understands church discipline. Probably a church deacon or elder, with proven spirituality, should be asked to go with.

How much of the situation should you tell them about?

If it is a private dispute between individuals, you should not tell them much more than to say you believe this person has sinned against you, you tried for reconciliation and it has failed, and you are requesting them to please accompany you as a biblical witness.

If it is a sin which has put them out of fellowship with God; then you would explain to the spiritually-minded person, who you are taking with you as a witness, what you believe the sin to be, so that they can be a more effective witness.

Are these witnesses passive or active? The witness theme seems to suggest they are there to behold how you rebuke, and how the other responds. However, verse 17 tells us '*if he will not hear them*', suggesting they are possibly joining in the call to repentance. When it is a known sin that is beyond dispute, and the person does not even deny the sin, then the witnesses are there to call them to repentance as well.

Several possible results are implied after this meeting:

- 1) He repents and is restored. Again, you have gained your brother.
- 2) The witnesses discover that the problem is not as you see it. Either they help arbitrate reconciliation there, or they privately show you that you mishandled it. In that case, you would have to return to the person and seek their forgiveness.
- 3) The person rejects the rebuke; and the witnesses can see that it is unrepentant defiance.

In that third case, we move to **verse 17**.

The Meeting in Public

'If he will not hear them, tell the church.'

What does this mean? Tell anyone you meet? Phone everyone in the church?

I would say the first thing is to tell the leadership, so that they can tell the church.

In certain cases, the leadership will call on the church members to seek after that person with calls and visits. The whole church 'bombards' the person with calls to repent. They will have to be very stubborn to resist multiple calls to repentance.

In certain cases, particularly if it is a matter of gossip, insubordination, or divisiveness, to further protect the body, the leadership can act on behalf of the church, while informing the church of what is being done. They can approach the person on behalf of the church to call on them to repent one more time.

Once again, the person may repent, at which time they are welcomed into full fellowship. Even if it reaches this stage, there does not need to be punishment if there is repentance. Now if a person is repentant, once it has gone to the whole church, their repentance will also need to be made known to the whole church. After all, if we all know we are calling on this person to come back, if they do, we need to know it. That may require some kind of public confession, or a statement by the leaders, in a corporate meeting, that this person has repented.

But sadly, such a one may reject the combined call of the church.

At this point, you have to ask, ‘Are they acting like a believer?’ They have been called back to Christ meekly and lovingly, privately; they have been called back by several people; they have been called back by the entire body. If they refuse to come back now, how are they acting? They are acting like someone still walking in darkness. The person walking in darkness says he or she has no sin, or hasn’t sinned, or sees no need to repent from it. The person walking in the light confesses his or her sin. If someone is actually walking in darkness, what fellowship has light with darkness?

In other words, at this point, we are formally recognising what their behaviour seems to indicate – we are not in fellowship together. The person is behaving as an unbeliever – ‘Gentile and tax collector’ is more a metaphor for unbeliever.

Now we do not know if they are believers or unbelievers. Only God knows that. And we are not declaring them to be saved or unsaved. But we are saying, ‘Right now, your actions are those of an unbeliever. You are behaving like one without the Spirit’s convicting power, without the desire to yield to Christ. Your actions indict you as one who does not follow Christ as a disciple, and therefore you are not in fellowship with Him or with us.’

So, the church takes this step of regarding the man as an unbeliever, of treating him as an unbeliever.

What does that mean?

1) Refuse them membership (**1 Cor 5:7-10; 13**).

Unbelievers are not allowed to be members of a local church, partake of the Lord’s Supper or serve. So we are saying, ‘We extended the right hand of fellowship to you to be a member, now we withdraw it.’ We would not permit them to continue to serve, if they have been serving, nor to partake of the Lord’s Supper.

2) Limit your fellowship (**1 Cor 5:11**).

The idea is – do not continue fellowshiping as before. Do not keep on having meals together; enjoying old times like nothing has happened.

2 Thes 3:14-15 (also v 6). Not shunning, but not comforting either.

Love him now as your unsaved neighbour, not as a brother in Christ. How do you love your unsaved neighbour? You evangelise him. You call on him to repent. You show him

kindness, courtesy and respect, without being close, intimate or sharing your life as you did before.

What is the goal here? Paul tells you in **2 Thes 3:14** – *‘that he may be ashamed.’*

If the fellowship has been what it should have been, he will miss it. If the discipleship has been what it should have been, he will know he is at fault. His own choices have brought about a loss of fellowship with the brethren. That sense of loss should be cause for humiliation, shame, and a desire to repent.

Paul calls it ‘delivering him to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.’ More than likely – the idea is – when you hand him over for chastening at Satan’s hand, God perhaps allows Satan to have more freedom over a believer who has been put out of a church, so that his fleshly ruin may bring him to repentance.

There is still the possibility that such a person may repent when you do this.

And that is the reason you are doing it. You are doing it to say, ‘This person is not acting like a believer, so they should not be in our fellowship.’ But you are doing it in hopes that if they are a believer, this will be the final thing which draws them back.

Then they are to be restored to full fellowship - **2 Cor 2:6-7** *This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, ⁷ so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow.*

There does not need to be any punishment or quarantine for the person if they have repented. Repentance means full restoration.

Restoration to fellowship does not mean restoration to leadership. If a person was in leadership of some kind, they obviously lose that when they fall into unrepentant sin. Depending on the position, there may be restoration to that position after a period of further counselling and a time of discipleship. In some cases, a person may never be able to return to the position. Forgiveness of sin and enjoyment of fellowship is not the same thing as the consequences of sin, such as a marred reputation, which can linger all your life and obstruct service.

The last few verses encourage us. *‘Whatever you bind on earth, will have been bound on earth, and whatever you loose, will have been loosed in heaven.’* Binding and loosing what? Sin - **John 20:23** *‘If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained’.* The idea is this – a person is confirmed to be unrepentant or to be repentant by the action of a Spirit-controlled church, acting according to His Word. The church carries out God’s will.

The construction suggests that when you followed these steps, God Himself was the One binding and loosing, and you were simply carrying it out. In fact, as per **verses 19 and 20**, if you agree on something corporately, God does it, because your agreement is heaven-sent. Christ is amongst you.

There are few other practices in Scripture with such a promise. It shows how close this is to God’s heart – that the church be continually strengthening its discipleship and its fellowship by restoring the ones who are straying, and by purging out the ones who were never disciples to begin with. This is why church discipline is worship, for it upholds the glory of God and the name of God in the church and in His people.