

“On Discipline”

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I believe that there are some truths that we can't escape, regardless of what we believe. There are certain truths that exist whether we want them to or not, whether we understand them or not. It's like gravity: Whether you like it or not, it's there, and there's no use in fighting it.

One of those inescapable truths is that every community is inclusive and exclusive. For every institution, group, or organization, there are certain boundaries. Some people are in, and others are out.

I don't think that's a hard concept to grasp, but some people don't like that idea. They think it's not very tolerant. But think of some examples.

Let's think of a community choir. Imagine that this community choir isn't very selective about who joins it. There are no auditions to get it. But imagine there's one tenor who keeps singing off-key in a very loud, obnoxious voice. If he persists, someone is going to ask him to tone it down or leave. Why? Because it makes the choir sound bad. Perhaps there might even be concern for this man's self-esteem. If he keeps singing in a voice that sounds like a dying duck, he's going to embarrass himself.

Think of a different example: Imagine a group of vegans who meet together to celebrate their meat-, egg-, and dairy-free lifestyle. What would happen if a member of the group came to a meeting with a cheeseburger in hand? That person would likely be asked to leave. The same thing is true of a person who wanted to volunteer for PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) and showed up in a fur coat.

Pastor Tim Keller writes, “The idea of a totally inclusive community is . . . an illusion. Every human community holds in common some beliefs that necessarily create boundaries, including some people and excluding others.”¹ Then he asks his readers to imagine what would happen if someone in an LGBT organization suddenly announced to the group, “I've had a religious experience and now I believe homosexuality is a sin.” That person would be asked to leave, of course.² Keller then adds, “Any community that did not hold its members accountable

¹ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Riverhead, 2008), 39.

² *Ibid.*, 40.

for specific beliefs and practices would have no corporate identity and would not really be a community at all.”³

So all communities include some people and exclude others. That’s an inescapable reality. And as Keller says, we shouldn’t be turned off by exclusivity. Instead of thinking that drawing boundaries is automatically wrong, we should ask ourselves, “Which community has beliefs that lead its members to treat persons in other communities with love and respect—to serve them and meet their needs? Which community’s beliefs lead it to demonize and attack those who violate their boundaries rather than treating them with kindness, humility, and winsomeness?”⁴

Here’s another inescapable reality: If you want to get better at something, you need to be disciplined. That’s pretty obvious if you’re thinking about something like sports. If you’re training to run a marathon, you need to spend time running a lot of miles each week. And you need to do things like stretching and drinking enough water and eating a healthy diet. If you’re not disciplined in these areas, you won’t become a better runner. You certainly won’t be able to run the 26.2 miles of a marathon. Similarly, if you want to be a better musician, you need to be disciplined. You need to spend time practicing. If you don’t practice, you won’t get better. Because so many people lack self-discipline, they hire coaches and trainers and teachers to help them stay on track, whether it’s in exercise or in music or in something else.

If we combine these two inescapable realities and we apply them to the local church, we get the practice of church discipline.

Before we think about church discipline, we should think about the church. The church is inclusive in one sense. Anyone, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and even moral and religious background, can turn away from their old way of living and turn in faith to Jesus. But the church is exclusive in the sense that only those who have repented of their sins and put their trust in Jesus can properly belong to the church. And the church should consist of people who want to get better at following Jesus. There should be a difference in the way that Christians and non-Christians live. And, as Tim Keller hints at in the quotations above, even though Christianity is exclusive, it teaches its members to love and respect those who are not Christians. Part of becoming a better Christian is learning how to love others who are different

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

than us. After all, we are called to be like Jesus, who loved his enemies and told us to do likewise (Luke 6:27-36).

Church discipline is when a church makes someone accountable if they are not living according to the way of Jesus. It's when a church tells a member that their beliefs or practices are contrary to Christianity. If that person refuses to change his or her ways, the church may have to remove that person from membership. The goal is to help that person live rightly, to keep destructive beliefs and practices outside the church in order to protect Christians, and to maintain a good reputation for Jesus and his church.

Church discipline is not an exciting topic for many people. In fact, some people find the idea primitive. It conjures up images of legalistic witch hunts. Some people think it's intolerant and exclusive and contrary to the way Jesus did things. Some people claim that Jesus was "radically inclusive." Jesus certainly did include people in God's kingdom who were previously kept out. But Jesus also taught about the seriousness of sin and the importance of not only believing in him and loving him, but also of turning away from sin and following his commandments. And he is the one who taught us about church discipline.

The word "discipline" is related to the word "disciple," and that gives us a clue that part of discipleship is being disciplined. "Disciple" literally means student or follower. And "discipline" can refer to instruction—that's why we talk about academic disciplines, or areas of study. But discipline can also refer to training. If we think of a church as a gym for the soul, we can see the importance of being disciplined. The regular activities of a Christian life, like Bible reading, praying, worshiping, serving, and so on are called spiritual disciplines. Those activities help us get better as Christians. And church discipline helps us all stay on the right track. It helps us make a distinction between the way Christians live and the way non-Christians live. It reminds us that once we've been adopted as God's children, we're expected to live according to a new code of conduct that reflects the family to which we belong.

Over the last few weeks, we've been looking at things that are part of the Christian life in the local church. Today, we're looking at church discipline. As we did in other weeks, we'll be looking at a few passages that help us understand this subject. The first one we'll look at is Matthew 18:15–20. I would invite you turn there now. Let's hear from Jesus himself.

¹⁵ "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be

established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”⁵

Let’s make some observations about this passage. First, the problem is a relational one. One person has harmed another.

Second, the responsibility to repair that relationship falls on the shoulders of the one who is harmed. It’s not the one who has sinned who must go to the one who has been sinned against. It’s the one who has been harmed who needs to confront the one who sinned. I think this makes sense because it’s often the case that the one who hurt the other isn’t even aware that he or she did something wrong. I know I’m not always aware if I’ve offended someone, and I certainly know I don’t read minds. The one who has been offended needs to confront the offender.

Third, the whole point of this is to “gain your brother [or sister].” This shows not only that it’s a relational issue, but that the point is to repair the broken relationship. The goal is to patch things up between two people. And if the one who has sinned simply says, “I’m sorry that I did that. I will do my best not to do it again,” then the whole episode is over.

Fourth, it’s only when the person who has sinned doesn’t confess that wrongdoing and repent of it that more people need to be involved. At first, the one sinned against must confront the offender. If the offender doesn’t see the errors of his or her ways, then the offended person must find two or three others to confront the offender. These are witnesses not to the original offense, but to the reaction of the offender. If the offender doesn’t listen to a few people, then the matter should be brought before the whole church.

Fifth, the offender has three opportunities to confess the sin. Even when the issue is brought before the whole church, the offender can still confess and repent and peace can be made.

Sixth, if the offender still doesn’t confess, then he is removed from the church and is treated like “a Gentile and a tax collector.” To Jesus’ Jewish audience, a Gentile was someone outside of God’s people. Now, people who of all ethnicities are part of God’s kingdom. In fact,

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

there were some Gentiles who came to faith in God in the Old Testament. But Gentile is sometimes used metaphorically even in the New Testament to refer to people who are not God's people (see Eph. 4:17; 1 Thess. 4:5; 1 Pet. 2:12; 4:3). And when Jesus says "tax collector," he doesn't mean someone who works for the IRS. In Jesus' day, tax collectors were known for taking more money than they needed to, and they collected taxes for the Roman Empire, the occupying forces. So they were viewed as traitors. The point is that people who refuse to confess their sin should not be treated like Christians. They show themselves not to be part of God's people.

Seventh, Jesus says that whatever the church decides to do will have been the decision of God. We find that in verse 18, which says, "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Binding and loosing refer to behavior that is prohibited and permitted, or to sins that are not forgiven and those that are. If a person refuses to repent of their sin, they are bound in their sin. If a person confesses their sin and repents, they are loosed or freed from that sin. What's important to see is that this verse could be translated "whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." That's really clumsy sounding, which is why it's not translated that way. But the point is that what the church decides reflects what has already been decided by God. It's not that the church decides something, and then God must obey the church's decision. That is backwards. The church discovers God's decision by faithfully and prayerfully applying God's word.

I think Jesus assumes that the church will handle things appropriately. I assume he means that if the church follows these procedures and handles things according to God's word, and does so prayerfully and with the right motivations, then what they decide will reflect God's judgment. If a church does the wrong thing by not following these procedures, or by not using God's word to determine what is actually a sin, then their decision will not be God's decision.

Eighth, Jesus promises to be with his people in the midst of this difficult process. I don't think anyone likes doing what Jesus describes here. It's not a pleasant task. It's not easy. Jesus knows that. But he promises that if multiple people agree on the right way to handle a difficult issue, it will be honored by God, and Jesus will be among them. Jesus says, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

I have to point out that that verse (v. 20) is not about a worship service or a prayer meeting. Some people misuse that verse. They usually do that when there's a small turnout at a worship service or when only a few people come to a prayer meeting. Guess what? Jesus is always with his people by means of the Holy Spirit, the third Person of God who dwells in everyone who trusts in Jesus. Jesus is always there. The point is that Jesus will be there with a few people who are making a difficult decision. We must always read verses in their proper context. So please don't rip this one out of its context. Don't use it unless you're talking about two or three Christians gathered to make a difficult decision.

So we see here the point of all of this is to repair relationships. It's for the good of the one who has been sinned against as well as for the good of the one who has sinned.

The second passage that deals with this issue is 1 Corinthians 5:1–13. As you're turning there, let me introduce the passage. The apostle Paul wrote a few letters to Christians in a city called Corinth, in Greece. This is the second letter he wrote to them, and the first of these letters that we have in the Bible. If you've read 1 Corinthians, you know that this church had many problems. Paul writes about one of those problems in this passage. The problem is no small sin, which gives us a sense of the magnitude of sins that require official church discipline. Let's read the passage:

¹ It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.

² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

³ For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. ⁴ When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

⁶ Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? ⁷ Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ⁸ Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. ¹² For what have I to do

with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?
¹³ God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

The sin here is that a man has been having a sexual relationship with “his father’s wife,” probably his stepmother and not his birth mother. Paul says that this sort of thing wouldn’t even be tolerated by pagans, but apparently it was being tolerated by the Corinthians, and Paul demanded that it should stop. This man should be removed from the church. (Apparently the woman was not a Christian, because Paul doesn’t mention her being removed from the church.) This church was known for being proud. Paul says that such a sin should cause them to mourn, not to boast of how great they are.

He says something pretty harsh, he says that the church should “deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.” In fact, the church has “the power of our Lord Jesus” to do such a thing. What does all this mean? I think it means that this man has proven that he is not now a part of God’s kingdom. If he’s not part of God’s kingdom, then he’s part of the kingdom of this world. Another way of putting that is that he is under the sway of the “ruler of this world” (John 12:31), or “the god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4). That is Satan, the devil. He is not really in charge of the whole world, but the world of sinful, unredeemed human beings is under his power and influence.⁶

It seems that what Paul is saying is that the sinful man should be removed from the church and its protection and comforts. And when the man is expelled from the church, he’ll find that the world is harsh and brings death. But there’s hope. This man’s spirit may be saved even if he suffers harm. This assumes that he turns to Jesus in the end. I imagine this is similar to what the younger son experienced in the parable of the prodigal son, found in Luke 15. In that story, a sinful younger brother walks away from his family and squanders his inheritance in wild living. It’s only after he’s run out of money and has been humiliated that he comes to his senses and turns back to his father.

Paul is describing a tough kind of love that at first will be very difficult for the sinful man, but may in the long run be for his good.

But why does this man have to be removed from the church?

⁶ Interestingly, sometimes people are said to be bound by Satan, and this binding is physically manifested (Luke 13:11, 16). Yet Jesus can free or “loose” such people from the binding of Satan (Luke 13:12). These connections should how this passage and Matt. 18:15-20 are related.

First, it teaches him that such behavior isn't acceptable in God's house. I should emphasize here that we are saved by God's grace and that all of us are sinners. All of us have done wrong things. And our wrong actions and motives and desires and thoughts taint whatever good we do. An illustration of this is found in the book of Ecclesiastes. In Ecclesiastes 10:1, we read,

Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench;
so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.

Even our little sins are enough to condemn us and our best works are tainted with sinful motivations (see also Isa. 64:6). So none of us are in God's family because we're good. And none of us lose a relationship with God after he's adopted us because we've done bad. What Paul is saying is that if you're in God's family, you're expected to live according to God's standards. And if you persist in not living according to God's standards, you never had real faith in Jesus to begin with. You were never transformed by God. You never received the Holy Spirit. Tough love that kicks a person out of a church is a wake-up call to the one who sins. It teaches such a person that they need to change or they will be kicked out of God's presence forever.

Second, removing a very sinful person protects the health of the church. In verses 6–8, Paul compares such sin to yeast that works its way through the whole batch of dough. In Paul's analogy, Jesus is the Passover lamb, who was sacrificed and whose blood covered the sinful Corinthians, sparing them God's wrath. But they are the unleavened bread of Passover. Their lives are supposed to be sacrifices to God—living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1), not sacrifices for their own sins. That means they should be pure. They shouldn't allow the "leaven" of egregious sin to contaminate them. The idea is that to tolerate such sins may seem like a small thing, but in time such sins can work their way through the whole church. If an incestuous man was tolerated, other people in the church may think sexual immorality was acceptable. The results would be devastating.

Third—and this isn't as clear from this passage, but it's certainly true—if the church has this kind of sinful behavior in it, it makes Jesus look bad. When Christians act in ways that Christians shouldn't act, it doesn't just make those Christians look bad; it makes Christ look bad. In the very next chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul is still addressing sexual immorality. He writes,

¹⁵ Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶ Or do you

not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two will become one flesh.”¹⁷ But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him (1 Cor. 6:15–17).

This is Paul’s argument: If you’re a Christian, you’re united to Christ. And if you have sex with someone else, your flesh is united to that person. And if you’re a Christian having sex with a prostitute, there’s almost a sense that you’re uniting Jesus to a prostitute. At the least, you, his bride, are cheating on him. Sexual immorality reflects poorly upon Jesus and his body, the church. So then Paul writes, in 1 Corinthians 6:18-20,

¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. ¹⁹ Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰ for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

Sexual immorality, along with other sins like greed and hate, is harmful to the body of Christ and to individual Christians. These sins must be avoided and if a so-called Christian is caught up in such sins, he or she should be removed from the church, in the hopes that such an action may actually help that person to see their true spiritual condition.

Paul says that the church shouldn’t associate with someone like this incestuous man. That’s a consistent command in the New Testament. Paul tells Christians in his second letter to the Thessalonians to “keep away” from those who refuse to work (2 Thess. 3:6). He says they should “have nothing to do with” those who don’t obey what he writes (2 Thess. 3:14). Paul tells Titus to “have nothing to do with” people who stir up division (Tit. 3:9-11). People who claim to be Christians yet who don’t believe and live rightly should be avoided.

But Paul doesn’t mean that Christians should avoid all sinful people. If that were the case, they couldn’t live in the world. Look again at verses 9-10: “I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.” Jesus prayed that his followers would not be “of the world.” He meant that they shouldn’t live the way that most people in the world, apart from God, live. But he didn’t pray that they would be removed from the world (John 17:15-16). We should hang around non-Christians in order to tell them about Jesus, as long as they are not influencing us in a bad way. We don’t have to worry about their sin rubbing off on us. But there’s a danger in letting someone

think they're okay in God's eyes when their actions say otherwise. It's bad for that person, it's a temptation to other Christians, and it makes the church and Jesus look bad.

That's why Christians need to judge each other. Yes, you heard that correctly. That's what Paul says. He writes, "For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside." Here's what he doesn't mean. He doesn't mean that we judge each other in the final, ultimate sense. We don't decide who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. And he doesn't mean we can't tell non-Christians that what they are doing is wrong. After all, if that were true, how could we call people to repent of their sins and put their faith in Jesus? What he means is that we can't police what happens in the world. But we can determine what kind of behavior will occur in the church. We should evaluate behavior in the church. That's our job. It helps us all stay on course.

But none of this applies to pastors, right? Because we're always right. Okay, you know that's not true. But the Bible says that certain conditions should apply when it comes to disciplining pastors. Let's read 1 Timothy 5:19–20:

¹⁹ Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²⁰ As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.

An elder is simply a pastor, also called an overseer or a shepherd in the Bible. Paul says that in the case of a pastor, two or three witnesses should bring a charge against the man. I suppose that's because he knew that leaders tend to draw false charges. But if there are two or three witnesses to a pastor's sins, and that pastor persists in sins, he should be rebuked in the presence of the church. Why? "So that the rest may stand in fear." If a leader can fall into sin, then no one is safe.

How does all this play out in this church? Well, our by-laws have some clear statements about membership and discipline. Members can be dismissed due to inactivity and members can be disciplined for teaching heresy, getting caught up in non-Christian religious groups, slandering people in the congregation, causing divisions, or for moral failures. We might think of those moral failures as the ones mentioned in the so-called "vice lists" of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and Galatians 5:19-21. The process to discipline a member is the one that Jesus describes in Matthew 18. But our by-laws clarify what the purpose of discipline is. This document says, "All actions of discipline will be conducted for the purpose of healing and restoration. The aim of this

church will be the ultimate repentance and forgiveness of those guilty of acts and attitudes which violate God's holy standards, and the comfort and encouragement of those innocent, but accused.” There is also a reference to Galatians 6, which begins with these words: “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.”

Sadly, many churches don't practice discipline. And the church suffers as a result. Sins are never corrected, and people who probably aren't Christians aren't called to change their lives.

Churches don't practice discipline for many reasons. They are afraid to lose members, or to appear to be legalistic. They are afraid of losing money that is given by members who might be subject to discipline. Perhaps one simple reason that churches don't discipline is because we don't really know each other well enough. We don't know what's happening in each other's lives. And perhaps that's why a lot of people don't really commit to churches. They stay distant because that's an easy way to never be disciplined.

So why would anyone want to join a church and be subject to discipline? Well, as I said earlier, discipline is necessary to become better at anything. Christians should want to become better Christians. Christians should want to become more like Jesus. Christians should want other Christians to help them stay on the path.

And we should realize this: God disciplines his children. This is what we read in Hebrews 12:7–11:

⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹ Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Discipline is not the opposite of love. Neglect is the opposite of love. And God doesn't neglect his children. He makes sure they grow in their character. He makes sure they become more like his Son, Jesus.

And I want to conclude with Jesus. If you're here today and you're not a Christian, you may hear all this and think that Christianity is very legalistic and judgmental. There's a lot that I

could say about that, and a lot that I already have said about it, but I only have time to say one more thing: No one is a Christian because he or she obeyed the rules. The Bible says that no human beings obey God's rules perfectly. But there is someone who did, and that is Jesus, the Son of God who became a human being without ceasing to be God. Jesus, the God-man, is the only one who obeyed God perfectly. Yet when he died on the cross, he was disciplined for us. In a very real way, his body was handed over to "Satan for the destruction of the flesh." He subjected himself to discipline he didn't deserve so that we could become children of God. And Jesus loves us so much that he wants us to stay away from things that destroy us. If a little disciple helps us stay on the path to eternal life, then it's an act of love, not legalism and judgment.