

November 16, 2016

The Importance of Church Discipline (Part 2)

1 Corinthians 6:2-3, **“Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life!”**

There are few things more discouraging to a mature Christ-follower than when sin in the church is disregarded or swept under the proverbial rug. As a pastor there are few things as discouraging as when the leadership in a church refuses to acknowledge or respond to blatant sin in the Body of Christ.

What makes this so discouraging both for pastors and for others in the flock is that sin, unrepented and blatant sin, if it is ignored causes great damage to the Body of Christ. So why are leaders so passive when it comes to this issue? The main reason is that most of us want to be liked and well thought of. I don't know too many people who genuinely like having people upset with them. A leader does not want to be viewed as unloving and has a desire to avoid conflict. While all of this is true, it is destructive to the local church and it is clearly disobedient to the Lord Jesus Christ's clear Biblical commands in regards to confronting sin in the Body of Christ.

In Matthew 18:15-17 Jesus gave us very detailed guidelines on how to handle the issue of sin in the church:

“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. 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. 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.”

In that passage our Lord uses the word **“church”** two times. **“Church”** is from the Greek word *ekklesia* which is translated to mean “called out ones.” The word was used at times to describe any kind of assembly of people. In Acts 7:38 for example says, **“This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness.”** In the King James Version it says **“the church in the wilderness.”** This was referring to the congregation of Israel.

Jesus had already introduced His disciples to the concept of the church back in Matthew 16:18, **“I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”** This means then that the instructions that He gives to them in Matthew 18 were given with the knowledge that there *would* be a New Testament body of believers.

The entire point that our Lord is making in Matthew 18 is that the *ekklesia*, the assembly of God’s redeemed people is the appropriate place where matters of dispute and discipline should be taken care of. As 1 Corinthians 6:2-3, which I cited at the beginning, makes very clear there is no civil court or higher authority on earth to which sin issues may be appealed.

It is the design of our Lord Jesus Christ that discipline take place in the church. Those who are genuinely saved should be motivated by a deep love and concern for their brothers and sisters in Christ. 1 John 3:14 says, **“We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.”** With this in mind, church discipline must be carried out in love, by loving fellow Christians, for the purpose of the genuine good and edification of the entire body of Christ locally.

Church discipline, when it is properly implemented, is always motivated by love. After all the first purpose of discipline is the restoration of the sinning brother or sister. Matthew 18:15 says, **“If you brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained a brother.”** The second purpose is that it purifies the church as Christ followers become more careful to watch their own lives and to avoid confrontation.

The goal of exercising church discipline should never be to shun, or embarrass someone, to be self-righteous, or to be abusive. The goal of discipline should always be to bring the sinning brother or sister back into right relationship with God and fellowship with the Body of Christ. Restoration, not retaliation, is always the goal of church discipline.

How do we know this? In Matthew 18:15 the word **“gained”** is used in the English Standard Version and that is translated from a Greek word that was most often used to describe a financial gain. Christ then is portraying the sinning brother or sister as an extremely valuable treasure.

This should be how every single Christian looks at the situation when they are duty bound to confront their brother or sister about sin.

God sees every soul as a treasured possession that is to be recovered. In Matthew 18:12-14, the verses immediately preceding Matthew 18:15-20. This shows us the heart of Christ and the context of the passage on discipline.

“What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of My Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”

We need to have the same level of concern that Jesus had. Sometimes it's very tempting to avoid these situations and take the easiest path that is our human nature. It is especially so when the brother or sister is being drawn away from the fellowship of believers. But that is the exact time that we as the church need to get involved. That is the heart of the a true shepherd and I ashamed to say that I have not taken this step often enough. A true shepherd will go to great lengths to find and recover that missing and wounded sheep and restore them to the fellowship of believers.

Confronting sin is not easy nor should it be. IN the church we are not to be busybodies who are constantly flitting around looking into other people's lives. Usually this is not what happens a though. What happens is, we become aware that a brother or sister has sinned and this is when we have a duty before our Lord and Savior to lovingly confront that brother or sister. Once we have become aware of serious sin in a brother or sisters life, it is imperative that we exhort, confront, and work diligently for the purity of the fellowship of believers and for victory in the life of the sinning man or woman.

All of that being said, we must be very careful to guard against abuses and we must always keep in the forefront of our minds the loving purpose of proper discipline at all times throughout the process. There can be a bit of a danger that the church becomes too enamored with rebuking one another. Pride can take over the process and poison relationships. Pride has a tendency to do this in regards to many things. This is why Jesus cautioned us to examine ourselves before confronting sin. Matthew 7:3-5 says, **“Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.”**

What we must understand and unfortunately accept though is that a person who is under discipline and refuses to repent is likely to lash out at those who are attempting to restore them. They are going to feel mistreated and abused, just as a disobedient child at times despises the discipline of their parents. It is not unusual for the unrepentant person to level accusations against those who have confronted them with their sin, of being unloving or unfair, or both. This is why when we are implementing discipline we should take great care to always act in love, with careful examination and patience.

1 Peter 4:8 says, “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.” There are times when it is best to graciously overlook sins that are committed by those in the church. But there are also times when sin is in the camp and it demands confrontation and a call to repentance.

Next time we will look at who is responsible to take this action.