

November 17, 2016

The Importance Of Church Discipline (Part 3)

Matthew 18:15, **“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.”**

In our past two articles we have discussed how Scripture is very clear concerning the necessity and purpose of church discipline. Jesus gave to the local church, the authority that it needed to handle discipline, and we see this in Matthew 18:15-20. That being said, the process of confronting a sinner with their sin and calling them to repentance should always begin at the individual level before it ever comes to the attention of the entire local body.

In Matthew 18:15, Jesus made it very clear that the discipline process should always begin with a person to person conversation: **“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault.”** Discipline is not carried out by a committee or initially some group of people. If the sinner repents of their sin, there is then no need to involve anyone else at all.

If the discipline is successful it will both suppress the effects of sin and it will limit the number of people who actually have knowledge of the transgression. The discipline process, if followed, as prescribed limits the knowledge of the offense as much as possible. So rather than broadcasting the transgression for all the world to see, it actually confines the knowledge of it. In most cases, repentance occurs early in the process and in those cases only the offender and the brother or sister who confronted them has knowledge of the offense.

The person to person confrontation that is outlined in Matthew 18 means then that church discipline is the responsibility of every believer in the church. This is not something that is supposed to be left up to the leadership of the local church. Far too often this is exactly what happens in most congregations though. Most people do not want to confront a sinning brother or sister personally, so they tell the pastor or an elder and then leave it up to them. If in fact you see a brother or sister in sin, the wrong *initial* response would be to report their sin to someone in leadership at the church. Matthew 18:15, **“Go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.”**

The purity of the Body of Christ is every Christian’s concern. The responsibility then to confront sin that besmirches the church begins with the person who first becomes aware of the sin. We are not to defer this task to someone else, as unpleasant as it may be. We also are not to spread the knowledge of the offense any further than is necessary either. Also, prayer for the sinning brother or sister should never be used as an excuse for obeying Christ’s very clear command to confront sin.

This leads us then to a very important question: What sins are grounds for disciplinary action as outlined in Matthew 18?

The answer to that question is pretty simple really. Church discipline is necessary in response to any offense that cannot be overlooked without harm to the offender or to the Body of Christ. With this in mind, we need to remember Peter's admonition in 1 Peter 4:8 which says, "**Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.**" Peter was not opposed to disciplining an unrepentant sinner, but was simply giving us a reminder that as Christ-followers we are to overlook sins against ourselves whenever possible and we are always to be ready to forgive insults and unkindness.

This is where understanding the original language is helpful. Verse 15 has been rendered in the ESV as, "**If your brother sins against you...**" However the NASB says, "**If your brother sins...**" The King James Version says, "**If thy brother shall trespass against thee...**" The ancient manuscripts seem to differ somewhat on this point. Some say, "**against thee**" and others simply say, "**If your brother sins,**" this seems to indicate then that we are to confront each other whether or not we are directly affected by the sin or not.

The reality is that all sins in some sense require discipline because all sin is against the entire of Body of Christ. So it matters not whether a brother or sisters sin directly impacts me or not because it is sin and sin that brings reproach on the church we are to then go and show the sinning brother or sister their fault in private.

Direct sins against oneself would include: if someone attacks you either verbally or even physically, steals from you, lies to you, slanders you, or is involved in gossip about you. In these instances we are never to respond in kind, returning evil for evil, we are not to hold a grudge, and we are not to report this sin to someone else before we have confronted them in person. Christ-like love for our erring brother or sister requires us to have our response be private in nature.

Examples of indirect offenses would be anything that brings reproach upon the Body of Christ. This would include things that would draw the sinner away from the fellowship of the church. This would include habitual sin or worldly behavior, the ignoring of spiritual duties, laziness, and doctrinal error. When a brother or sister is drawn away from the fellowship of believers, that loss has an impact on the entire body. Therefore, any sin that has the potential of creating such a loss is a sin that must be confronted.

We must understand that any sin that brings reproach on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ is an indirect sin against the church. Why? Because it says in 2 Corinthians 5 that we are ambassadors for Christ and so we bear that reproach. If you discover a brother or sister in Christ in a morally compromising situation, then you are duty bound to confront them. Just because you were not directly impacted by the sin does not mean you do not have a responsibility and yes an obligation to confront your brother or sisters sin. That is precisely what Paul was confronting and rebuking in very strong terms in 1 Corinthians 5.

What if the sin is against non-believers? Is the sinner still subject to the discipline of the church? Absolutely! Because again the sin dishonor Christ in the eyes of the world and therefore the sin bring reproach on the entire fellowship of believers.

Having said all of this it is important to remember that church discipline is the necessary response to any offense that cannot be overlooked without harm to the offender or harm to the church. We must always remember though that the goal of discipline is the repentance of the sinner. Discipline always needs to be carried out in the spirit of love, gentleness, patience, and grace. I am reminded of the Lord's prayer in which we ask Him to forgive us our sins and for us to forgive those who have trespassed against us.

Unfortunately though, person to person confrontation does not always lead to repentance. This is why our Lord outlined for us four steps in the church discipline process. The next time we will begin looking at that process.