

November 21, 2016

The Importance Of Biblical Church Discipline (Part 4)

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.”

One thing I have learned the hard way in my twelve years in ministry is that issues involving sin rarely get better just by ignoring them. If a bomb or some kind of explosive device is found in a home or office building, the police would be called, the bomb squad would be brought in, and the bomb would be removed or detonated. It would be dealt with in some way or another. The situation would not get better if the bomb was discovered and then nothing was done about it. That situation is not going to improve, it will only get worse.

In the Body of Christ, unrepentant sin is just like that ticking time bomb, and church leaders cannot afford to just ignore that situation anymore than the authorities can afford to ignore a ticking time bomb. Taking a passive wait and see approach to sin in the body of Christ almost always leads to some sort of “explosion” and the damage is often devastating.

The popular approach that most church leaders take is to pray about the problem. While this is critical to the process it is not the *only* thing that Scripture calls for. When that is all the church leaders do that is an abdication of their duty as shepherds of the flock. God expects not just the church leadership, but everyone in the church to take responsibility for sin in the church. Paul makes that very clear in 1 Corinthians 5:9-13 as he exhorts the congregation in Corinth to deal with an incestuous relationship in their midst. In fact, when the church does what it is supposed to do and deals with sin according to God’s plan, then God Himself places His stamp of approval on the process and on the result. Matthew 18:18-20 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. 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. For where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I among them.”**

In my last article we looked at what sins specifically call for church discipline. We also emphasized that the first phase of church discipline is a responsibility that falls on the shoulders of all church members.

The first step after recognizing that you have a situation that requires discipline is provided for us in 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 the Greek the word **“go”** is a present imperative which means that this is a command not a suggestion. If you see your brother or sister in Christ in sin, you must go!

This first phase is to be done **“between you and him alone.”** There is no need to involve anyone else at this point. Don’t gossip about the offense to anyone else under the pretense of praying for them. Just quietly go to the brother or sister, tell them their fault just between the two of you.

Discipline is difficult with close friends because so much is at stake. Discipline is also very difficult with people who we don’t know well. In these situations we tend to think, “Who am I to intrude into this person’s life?” While we are intimidated with the thought of confronting friends, we tend to be indifferent towards the people we aren’t close to. In either situation we are to be faithful to Christ’s command in Matthew 18:15.

The Greek verb for the phrase **“tell him his fault”** is a word that conveys the idea of light exposing something that is hidden. This calls for a clear, precise discussion of the brother or sister’s offense. This does not imply that he or she is unaware of their sin – this process is not limited to sins of ignorance. Rather, the phrase means that you should disclose what you know about their sin, so that he or she will realize that their offense is known. This helps establish accountability for the offense. If they thought their sin was secret, they then must realize that it has been uncovered. If they thought they could sin without consequence, they now must give an answer.

If the first step of discipline results in repentance, then that will be the end of the process which means that **“you have gained your brother.”** Nothing else needs to be done. You should encourage the erring brother or sister to demonstrate the genuineness of their repentance by doing whatever is necessary to make things right.

If restitution is called for, then they need to be encouraged to follow through with this. If others have been hurt by their sin, then they need to go to them and seek reconciliation. Matthew 5:23-24 says, **“So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”** If they demonstrate true and real repentance, that should be the end of the matter. You can then rejoice that you have gained your brother or sister.

Ideally, the first step will be the final step in the majority of cases. Unfortunately, those who remain unrepentant require the next step in church discipline, which is what we will look at next time.