

Why Church Matters

Discipline Matters: Loving You With Discipline (Matthew 18:15-20)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on November 8, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ One thing I've always appreciated about this church is its commitment to the Word of God. When I do membership interviews, I can't tell you how many have said one of the biggest things they're looking for in a church is biblical teaching. We're a people that seeks to not just know God's Word but to do God's Word.
 - ▶ So if the Bible mandates something, we want to do it. Certainly on an individual level when it comes to our personal discipleship to Christ. But also on a corporate level when applied to our membership in the Body of Christ. If we're given instructions for how to carry out our life together in the church, then we want to do it.

- ❖ If the Bible says to make disciples and baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we do it (Mt. 28:19). If it says to eat the bread and drink the cup in remembrance of him, we obey (1 Cor. 11:23-26). **We're good about obeying and applying these mandates within the life of our church.** But there's always been one glaring oversight that's bothered me. It has to do with passages like today's and the issue of church discipline.
 - ▶ Jesus' mandate to his church to exercise discipline within its own membership is just as clear as the commission to make and baptize disciples or to observe the Lord's Supper. **And yet in the life of our church, for forty years, I'm not aware of a single instance where our church followed through with the entirety of Jesus' instructions found here in Matthew 18.**
 - We may have drawn out principles from our passage to deal with personal disputes. But have we carried out Matthew 18 to its fullest application – to the point that we tell the church about unrepentant sin and treat the impenitent member as a Gentile and a tax collector?

- ❖ **Suffice it to say, we have not fully practiced church discipline.** And it's not because we don't understand the passage or know if it's still applicable. Our church's founding document explicitly mentions Matthew 18 under the heading "Termination of membership". Listen to what our constitution says, *"Should a member be found to have conducts explicitly contradictory to scriptural teachings, to the extent that the name of Christ is blemished, and who does not repent even after repeated admonitions from the pastors and/or elders and deacons as in accordance to Matthew 18:15-17, his membership shall be terminated at the recommendation of the Church Council by vote in a General Membership Meeting."*
 - ▶ This was written into our constitution because apparently our founders believed Scripture spoke with clarity on this issue just as it does with baptism and the Supper, and yet for various reasons we have not exercised this responsibility with the same consistency or regularity as when we baptize or observe communion.

- ❖ And my question is why. ***Why have we neglected this biblical mandate and how do we begin applying it in our church?*** I think part of the answer is a lack of awareness. We don't teach on this so I'm not surprised if some of you have never even heard of church discipline. And the other reason this is a neglected practice is because those of us who have heard of it have misconceptions. That's why we're reluctant to embrace the practice.

- ▶ So my goal today is to clarify our understanding of church discipline and to explain how it works, how to realistically practice it in our life together as members of this church. I've divided this message into two parts: Understanding church discipline and practicing church discipline.

Understanding Church Discipline

- ❖ Let's start with a more holistic view and try to develop a biblical understanding of church discipline. This is such an important first step because, in our day and age, when we hear the phrase "church discipline" it immediately conjures up some pretty negative images.
 - ▶ Perhaps the first thing that comes to mind is a colonial church publicly shaming someone by sowing a "scarlet letter" on their dress or something to that effect. **Church discipline sounds like an antiquated means of punishment. It's hard to imagine what kind of role it could have in a church that preaches a gospel of forgiveness, a gospel of grace and unconditional love.** Discipline sounds judgmental, hypercritical, and downright unloving.
 - **What I want to help you see is how church discipline can be a true act of brotherly love.** I think what will help us understand what church discipline actually is – is to consider the practice in view of three things: a) In view of discipleship, b) In view of the gospel, and c) In view of covenant membership.
- ❖ Let's look at church discipline **A) in view of discipleship.** I'd argue that discipline is just one aspect – a loving aspect – of discipleship. Did you ever notice the common root in the words *discipline* and *discipleship*? That root word (*discipulus*) has to do with education. Just think about how in education there's always an element of *instruction* as well as *correction*.
 - ▶ Think back to when your kindergarten teacher taught you how to write your name. She showed you how to hold your pencil and write your letters. She was essentially discipling you in handwriting. It's a process that always involves instruction.
 - Now when it was your turn to give it a try, if she never corrected your five-finger grip of that pencil or your backwards J, then she's not really teaching. She's failing to disciple you. **Because both instruction and correction are vital if you are to ever master the *discipline* of handwriting.**
- ❖ Now take those two categories and, when you talk about discipleship, you can make a distinction between *instructive* and *corrective* discipline. **Instructive discipline is what we normally think of when we picture discipling someone.** It includes any effort to mature disciples through teaching and instruction, through modeling and equipping. Included is also an emphasis on accountability and biblical warnings to resist sin and repent.
 - ▶ So a church's practice of *instructive discipline* includes our teaching and counseling, our small groups and accountability groups, life-on-life discipleship, etc. Now praise God this is happening in our church all the time! **And as we grow more effective at instructive discipline, it mitigates the need for corrective discipline.**

- ❖ **Corrective discipline is where an individual believer or the church as a whole confronts a member who has fallen into sin with the goal of restoration (cf. Gal. 6:1; Jas. 5:19-20).** The aim is to restore broken relationships with God or each another. And to restore the individual's witness, their credibility to represent Jesus as one of his ambassadors.
 - ▶ That's corrective discipline, and it's going to involve confronting, admonishing, rebuking, as well as some mechanism to deal with one's membership in the church if the person persists in sin and unrepentance.
 - That's our focus today as we talk about church discipline. Now I realize all those activities carry a pretty negative connotation. **But my whole point is that these aspects of church (corrective) discipline simply fall under the larger umbrella of discipleship.**

- ❖ That means if we're going to be a church that's all about discipleship, then we can't neglect discipline. A teacher who fails to correct her students when they err is ultimately failing to teach her students. **Likewise, a church that fails to discipline its members when they sin is a church that's ultimately failing to disciple its members.**
 - ▶ All the negative images you have are just the result of churches that misuse this biblical practice. **There's no doubt that church discipline has been abused and used to hurt people. But you could say the same about something as innocuous as a church prayer meeting.** You could easily abuse praying for one another as a cover for gossip. So just because there's a potential for abuse, doesn't mean church prayer or church discipline should be seen as an unloving practice.

- ❖ We all appreciate a church where members are praying for one another, visiting one another, encouraging one another, serving one another, etc. That's what discipleship is all about and we love it. We feel loved *by* it. **And all I'm saying is that to round out our disciplining, let's include disciplining one another and see it similarly as an act of love.**

- ❖ Another way to help you understand church discipline is to see it **B) in view of the gospel.** One of the reasons why churches shy away from discipline is because we've been disciplining each other with an insufficient gospel. **What I mean is that when we're either making or maturing disciples, we preach to them a gospel about God's grace that *forgives* you – but we often overlook how grace also *changes* you.**
 - ▶ It goes back to that discussion we had before about the penalty and power of sin. We tend to focus our gospel on the penalty of sin. Jesus died on the cross to forgive sin's penalty, which is the wrath of God, the punishment of eternal death. Because of faith in Jesus and what's he done for you, your sin is forgiven.

- ❖ Now if a church is disciplining people with a gospel that focuses solely on penalty and forgiving sin, then of course it's going to sound strange (and even antithetical) to speak of correcting sin. ***Why would I need my sin corrected if it's already been forgiven?*** Why do you need to confront me with it? Why do I need to confess it or turn away from it? It's been forgiven. The penalty has been paid.

- ▶ **Do you see how the gospel you preach will determine how people respond to church discipline?** If you preach a sufficient gospel that addresses – not only sin’s penalty – but also its power (its enslaving grip over you), **then it’s understandable that true Christians, touched by grace, will truly change.**

- ❖ If a church is disciplining with a gospel that says God’s grace is here to change you and bear fruit in your life, then if that individual’s life is characteristically the same as before (if there’s no visible fruit of God’s grace and Spirit) – then correction is called for. Because without evidence of good fruit (which includes a sensitivity to and a hate of one’s own sin), there’s a chance you might not be saved yet.
 - ▶ So even if the change is slower and smaller than we hope, a church that’s all about discipleship and all about the gospel should still expect change in the lives of its members. **Church discipline is simply the right and necessary response to a lack of visible fruit or clearly bad fruit in the lives of members.**

- ❖ And it’s not only the right response. It’s the loving response. **Because remember, the gospel brings you into a new family, a heavenly one, where God is now your Father.** And as anyone who has kids knows, love is what compels a father’s discipline.
 - ▶ Any dad who lashes out at his kids with anger and hostility is not disciplining. He’s sinning. **True discipline comes from a heart of love that desires the good of the one being disciplined.** Imagine a father who warns his toddler not to stick her finger into a socket, and yet she does so anyways. To shrug his shoulders and say, “Oh well all’s forgiven” is *not* a loving response. To do nothing to correct behavior that is blatantly harmful to the child is not loving – it’s indifferent at best; hateful at worst.
 - But listen to how Scripture describes our heavenly Father’s response to our harmful behavior. **Hebrews 12:6** says, “*For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.*” (cf. Prov. 3:12). I don’t think any of us would dare claim to love Christians better than the Father himself. So if his love for us includes discipline, then of course our love for each other should do the same.

- ❖ There’s one last angle before moving on. Let’s consider church discipline **C) in view of covenant membership.** This is building off of my previous messages on why membership matters. When we looked at Matthew 16, we saw how Peter makes a public profession of faith in Christ, and Jesus responds by affirming his profession of faith to be true and granted from heaven and not the flesh. **Jesus was functioning as God’s Great Ambassador who’s been authorized to speak on behalf of heaven.**

- ❖ And then in chapter 16:19, Jesus gives Peter and the apostles a set of keys, the keys of the kingdom. They symbolize authority. Essentially, the apostles were authorized as ambassadors to do the very thing Jesus just did for Peter – to speak on behalf of heaven. **Jesus gave them authority to declare what’s bound and loosed in *heaven* by binding and loosing on *earth*.**

- ▶ That's what the keys are for. The apostles are to listen to people and their profession of faith in Christ, and they're supposed to affirm whether or not that profession is true and granted from heaven and not the flesh. **To those they affirm, they use the keys to open up the front gate and welcome you into a church.** They bind you together with other believers. It's what Peter did for Cornelius in Acts 10:34-43.
 - **But if it's evident that your profession of faith is false, they'll loose you from the church.** They'll use those same keys to open the back gate to dismiss you, since they can no longer affirm your membership in the kingdom. It's what Peter did to Simon the magician in Acts 8:20-21.

- ❖ And all of this is relevant to our discussion because in Matthew 18:18, there's another mention of binding and loosing people on earth on behalf of heaven. So you can't understand Matthew 18 without the context of Matthew 16 and what it means for church membership. **Today's passage is essentially an illustration of the keys being put to use by a church.**
 - ▶ Like the apostles, church members collectively have been authorized to speak on behalf of heaven. To make declarations affirming the genuineness of someone's profession of faith in Christ by binding him/her with other believers. **That binding together is just another way of saying church membership.**

- ❖ By baptizing believers, we're making a statement. By welcoming new members previously baptized by another church, we're making the same statement. We're declaring to the world that these individuals are collectively the Body of Christ on earth. They're representatives of our King. Their lives give testimony to Jesus and his gospel.
 - ▶ But now think about the implication. **If I'm a church member, then I bear the responsibility to live up to that name.** To faithfully represent our King and his kingdom in the way I live life together with fellow members.
 - And if I'm not doing that, if I'm failing to represent the King because I'm living comfortably in my sin and persisting in unrepentance, then I need correction. I need church discipline. Now if this still doesn't sound like love, then hang in there and let's walk through Matthew 18 and I'll show you how church discipline works.

Practicing Church Discipline

- ❖ But there's a few preliminary observations to make going into details. First, take context into consideration. I'm sure you can draw out principles and apply it to resolve marital problems, workplace disputes, or use it for general conflict resolution. But the specific context is the church (*ekklesia*). It's mentioned in v17. **Jesus is specifically talking about how to deal with conflict between brothers, between fellow members of a local church.**
 - ▶ Obviously that could include a husband and wife who are members of their church, or the conflict between two members could be a workplace issue if they work for the same company. My point is that a full application of Matthew 18 can only be conducted in a local church context where membership is practiced.

- ❖ Another thing to note is that even though the scenario Jesus raises deals with interpersonal conflicts, **Matthew 18 can be applied more broadly because the main concern – no matter what the sin – is for sinners to repent when confronted with their sin.**
 - ▶ And the underlying concern beneath that is for the holiness of the church. The church is to be holy, set apart, from the world. That means church members are not to live like Gentiles and tax collectors. The disciples would've understood Gentiles as those outside God's covenant community and tax collectors as those who betrayed the covenant community. **They're part of the world, and Christians are to live differently from them – or else be set loose and lumped in with them.**
- ❖ Now let's look at the scenario Jesus is painting. There's a brother in your church who has sinned against you, and at this point he's yet to repent. So your relationship is broken, and his witness is broken. **He's mistreated you, but what's worse is that he's misrepresenting the King you both claim to represent.** *So what do you do?* Jesus lays out four stages of church discipline. Some argue there's a fifth stage that precedes them all.¹

Stage One: Self-Discipline

- ❖ **This preliminary stage of church discipline is self-discipline.** When we think church discipline, we picture one person confronting another over his/her sin. But it all begins with Christians confronting themselves over their own sin. **So in a sense, church discipline should be happening all the time in our church because it should be happening all the time in our own lives.** Think about it. You're supposed to love others as you love yourself. Well if you regularly discipline yourself, then love is what motivates you to discipline others.
- ❖ Church discipline begins and ends with self-discipline. The goal is restoration. But not just to merely set a matter straight between two people. We want to help the offender to become more self-disciplined in the future. There's a remedial effect. It's for their good.
 - ▶ **I want to stress that the spirit behind church discipline is corrective and remedial.** It's not about punishing a person. It's about restoring relationships, restoring one's witness, and helping them grow in maturity and self-discipline.

Stage Two: One-on-One

- ❖ **The second stage of discipline is to go one-on-one.** If your brother sins against you or you see him living comfortably in his sin, then you go to them privately and try to bring that sin out of darkness and into light. Now if your brother confesses and repents, then the goal of church discipline is met. It stops right there. Your relationship is restored, and so is your brother's witness. He's rightly representing Christ again.
 - ▶ That's important to stress. **The goal is not just to get the other person to admit fault.** The goal is for their repentance to translate into visible fruit in their life and behavior, so that they're witnessing to Jesus and no longer dragging his name in the mud. That's what matters.

¹ See Jay E. Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline*, pgs. 39-44.

Stage Three: Bring Two Witnesses

- ❖ But if the person still refuses to listen, then Jesus instructs you to invite others into the process. **This is the third stage where you try again but this time with witnesses.**
 - ▶ *Now how do you know when to move on to this stage?* It's not about a certain duration of time or a certain number of conversations with the offender. It's based on whether or not you detect, in your private sessions that the person is genuinely refusing to listen. Then you ought to move on to stage three.
 - But be careful to distinguish the difference between “a refusal to listen” and “a failure to understand your viewpoint”. In other words, as long as you two can carry on a reasonable discussion over the sin at hand, then you (as the initiator) can't charge the offender with a refusal to listen. Give it more time.

- ❖ But if private conversations are truly going nowhere, then bring in witnesses. They don't have to be witnesses to the actual sin in question. It just means they're going to witness the next time you confront the brother about his sin. **And their job is to substantiate whether or not he responds with humble repentance or stubborn refusal to listen.**
 - ▶ Now notice the concern to keep the number of people involved as small as necessary to bring about repentance. **It shows how love and respect is driving the process. That's different than the desire to save face and avoid shaming the person.** If that's the attitude driving the process, then you'll never take it to the next stage if needed. If all you want is to save face then you'll drop it and leave your brother in his sin. But if you love him, then love will compel you to stage four.

Stage Four: Tell it to the Church

- ❖ **The fourth stage in church discipline is telling it to the church.** Now we should note that up to this stage, every act of discipline would be considered informal. That means everything in stages 1-3 could've occurred without a church leader involved. **In a healthy church, discipline should be happening all the time on a private basis without public knowledge.**
 - ▶ But there will be occasions, when stage four is necessary. Now by telling it to the church, it doesn't mean just the church leaders, even though it'll likely involve the pastors and elders. **There are usually two phases to this stage: the first involving the elders, but if there is no resolution then the second involves the congregation.**
 - And to be clear, telling the church doesn't mean standing up in a worship service like this and airing out the sin at hand. Here the “*church*” means the members. You bring this issue to a closed meeting of a church's membership.

- ❖ *And what do you tell them?* You tell them that so-and-so is under discipline for this or that sin. They don't need juicy details, but members do need to know enough to be able to competently counsel and correct the person in a meaningful way.
 - ▶ At this point, you're not shunning. You're not refusing to fellowship. **You're just no longer going to fellowship as though nothing were wrong.** It's no longer business as usual when you get together. Any time spent in public or private should be aimed at addressing the sin at hand versus just hanging out like normal.

Stage Five: Let Loose the Unrepentant

- ❖ But if the brother still refuses, if he continues to misrepresent Jesus, then the members are responsible to remove him from among them and to start treating him as they would a non-believer. *“Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”* **This is the fifth stage where you let loose the unrepentant from membership.**
 - ▶ Of course that means treating him with love and respect as you would any non-believer and constantly holding out the gospel of reconciliation. **But it also means drawing a clear line so that he knows he’s living like a non-believer and that his church can no longer vouch for his claim to be otherwise.**

- ❖ On one hand, you do this *for the sake of the world* since this brother is misrepresenting Jesus. You don’t want to send the wrong message that this is what a Christian looks like. You also do it *for the sinner’s sake*. You don’t want to give false assurance. You don’t want him thinking he’s right with God when he’s so deep in sin and so far from repentance. But if you keep treating him like a church member, that’s exactly what you’d be doing.
 - ▶ For love of the world and for love of the individual, we, as a church, need to make a public declaration and ceremonially demonstrate that this person is not a member. And more importantly, that we can’t vouch for his claim to be a Christian.

- ❖ **Think about how this morning we made a public declaration and ceremonially welcomed new church members.** We vouched for their claim to be Christians by baptizing them. We turned the keys of the kingdom this morning and opened the front gate for them.
 - ▶ **My point is that a similar kind of public act needs to take place if and when we have to pull out those keys and show someone out the back gate.** When we can no longer vouch for their claim to be ambassadors for Christ. Next week I’ll show you what that can look like on a practical level when we study 1 Corinthians 5.

- ❖ I don’t know how you feel about that. If it still feels unloving. If it feels like we’re “voting someone off the island”. If we don’t like you, then we’ll get enough members to vote you out. But really that couldn’t be further from the truth.
 - ▶ This is about love. It’s because we love too much to allow each other to remain self-blinded to our sin and comfortable in our unrepentance. It’s because we love each other too much that we discipline each other.

- ❖ So ask yourself: *Have I entered into a kind of relationship with my church where I’ve let fellow members love me in this way – where they can love me with discipline?* That requires more than just showing up every week to service or small group. You have to intentionally invite this kind of love. Which is exactly what you do when you join a church.
 - ▶ Of course you can always remain in a casual, loose affiliation with a church. You can never join and never be subject to church discipline. That might seem like an advantage. **But in reality you’d be depriving yourself of love.** A love you’re not going to get from this world. It’s only found in the context of church membership. I urge you to attend our membership class next Sunday. Come and join us.