

Matthew 18:15-20 “A Commitment to Biblical Church Discipline”\*\*

Main Idea: In Matthew 18:15-20 Jesus gave His followers helpful instruction regarding church discipline. In this message, we’re going to look carefully at what He said in its context, and then talk about the implications for us as a church.

- I. To enter God’s kingdom, you must become a little one (Matt 18:1-4).
- II. To live rightly in God’s kingdom, you must care for other little ones (Matt 18:5-35).
  - A. Make sure you treat little ones as if they were Christ (5).
  - B. Make sure you don’t cause another little one to sin (6-20).
    - 1. Deal with sin in your own life (7-9).
    - 2. Deal with sin when a little one goes astray (10-14).
    - 3. Deal with sin when a little one sins against you (15-20).
  - C. Make sure you forgive a little one whenever he asks (21-35).

Implications: If we really believe Christ, we will view church discipline as a good gift to help us fight our battle with sin.

Question #1: What are the prerequisites to church discipline?

- 1. You must believe your Bible.
- 2. You must believe that church membership is a wonderful privilege.
- 3. You must love your brother more than yourself.

Question #2: What are the procedures for church discipline?

- 1. If your brother sins, go and confront him alone (Matt 18:15; Gal 6:1).
- 2. If he doesn’t repent, go again with one or two others (Matt 18:16; Deut 19:15).
- 3. If he still doesn’t repent, inform the church (Matt 18:17a).
- 4. If he won’t listen to the church, treat him as an unbeliever (Matt 18:17b).

Question #3: What is the purpose of church discipline?

- 1. The goal is to restore our brother.
- 2. The goal is to protect the church.
- 3. The goal is to display the glory of God’s character.

I’ve joined a few organizations in my life. As a child I was in the cub scouts, on a couple of Little league baseball teams, and in a 4-H club. Later in Junior High and High School I joined some athletic teams and even became a member of the Future Farmers of America organization.

As I recall every organization I’ve joined had certain requirements for belonging. They had a purpose, and you had to embrace the purpose. You had to pay dues, or help raise money for uniforms and equipment. You had to attend meetings, or practices, and then you got to play in the games, or enjoy the parties. And of course, you had to support your team members and follow the instructions of the leader. Nobody forced you to join, and you knew going in that if you kept the requirements, you would enjoy the privileges of belonging, and if you didn’t, you were out.

I still chuckle when I think about being a member of the Future Farmers of America. I had no ambition of being a farmer. Really I just wanted to be part of something with my teenage buddies. So I got an FFA jacket, went to FFA meetings, helped raise money for our projects, and of course, learned and could quote the FFA creed.

“I believe in the future of farming with a faith born not of words, but of deeds-- achievements won by the present and past generations of agriculturists; in the promise of better days through better ways, even as the better things we now enjoy have come to us from the struggles of former years.” And that’s just the first of five paragraphs!

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\*\*Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

That's interesting, isn't it? To belong to this secular organization called the Future Farmers of America, you have to *believe* something, and you have to *say* publicly you believe it. *I believe in the future of farming.*

And that's not all you professed. I won't recite all five paragraphs, but I want you to hear the second: "I believe that to live and work on a good farm, or to be engaged in other agricultural pursuits, is pleasant as well as challenging; for I know the joys and discomforts of agricultural life and hold an inborn fondness for those associations which, even in hours of discouragement, I cannot deny."

I said those words. You had to say them to be a member of the FFA. But though I said them they weren't true, not for me. I didn't know the joys and discomforts of agricultural life. Sure, I lived on a farm, and I saw farmers every day who did know the joys and discomforts of agricultural life. But I didn't experience what I professed.

That's because I wasn't a farmer. I just liked the fringe benefits that went along with being a member of the Future Farmers of America.

Is that the way church membership works? Sadly, in many cases, yes. It's not uncommon for a church's membership roll to be two or three times the size of its Sunday attendance. "How many members do you have?" "We have 250," is the reply. "How many gathered to worship last Sunday?" And the answer? "Uh, about 110."

Is that the way the Lord intended for His church to operate? It's not.

When you read the four Gospel accounts, surprisingly, you see the word "church" in only two passages, both in Matthew. In the first Jesus said, "I will build my church." That's Matthew 16:18. In the second, which is Matthew 18:17, Jesus said, "If he [a brother who sins against you] refuses to listen to them [to two or three brothers who urge him to repent of his sin], tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan."

That's significant. Jesus mentioned the church only twice. In the first He said He would build it. In the second He made it clear He wanted it to be kept pure, and He gave the assignment of keeping the church pure to the church itself. Specifically, if there is unrepentant sin in the life of a person who belongs to a church, Jesus said to *tell it to the church*, so that the church can and will deal with that problem.

Jesus made it clear that it's supposed to mean something to be part of His church. The church certainly means something to Him. He gave His life for it, and every day since He demonstrates His care for it in countless ways. The church is precious to Christ, and so should it be to us.

One of the ways we demonstrate the significance of the church is by doing what Jesus instructed His followers to do in Matthew 18, and that brings us to the seventh mark of a healthy church.

During the Fall months, we're taking time to identify from God's Word nine marks of a healthy church. We are committed to these nine marks at WBC, and we want to remind ourselves of them, and affirm them.

One, WBC is committed to *expository preaching*. Two, to *biblical theology*, preaching the whole Bible. Three, to *the gospel*, to knowing it, believing it, gathering to celebrate it, and scattering to make it known. Four, we're committed to a *God-centered understanding of conversion*. Five, to *God-centered evangelism*. Six, to *church membership*. And now, seven, to *biblical church discipline*.

In this message, we're going to do two things. First, we're going to look carefully at what Jesus said about church discipline in Matthew 18:15-20, paying close attention to the context of the entire chapter. Then secondly, we're going to talk about the implications of what Jesus said for us as a church.

Often, we get into trouble when we ignore the context of a passage. That's especially the case if jump right into Jesus' teaching on church discipline in Matthew 18:15-20. We must see the context, both what precedes it and follows it, if we're to understand it rightly.

Notice how the chapter begins. Verse 1 says, "At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'" Interesting question. Why did the disciples ask about the kingdom? Because they're standing in the presence of the King.

Matthew's Gospel presents Jesus as King. It starts with His royal genealogy in chapter one. It moves in chapter two to a visit by the magi who asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We have come to worship him (2:2)." In chapter three John the Baptist announces, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near (3:2)." In chapter four, Jesus begins to preach and announces, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near (4:17)." In chapters five to seven, Jesus teaches what living in His kingdom is all about, in what we call His Sermon on the Mount. In chapters eight to fourteen, Jesus demonstrates His royal authority all over Galilee by preaching and doing miracles. In chapters fourteen to seventeen, He does the same in regions outside of Galilee. In chapter eighteen He returns to Galilee for one last public ministry, and then begins His journey south to the cross in chapters nineteen through twenty-seven, climaxing with His resurrection in chapter twenty-eight.

*Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?* That's the disciples' question, and the answer King Jesus gave them shocked them greatly. First, He *showed* them the answer, and then He *told* them with words. Notice what He did in verse 2, "He called a little child and had him stand among them." And then, with all eyes on that little child He said this in verses 3-4, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

We're not going to take time to put meat on the bones, but I want to give you the skeletal structure of the whole chapter. In Matthew 18 Jesus the King makes two points perfectly clear regarding God's kingdom.

#### I. To enter God's kingdom, you must become a little one (Matt 18:1-4).

There are no big shots in God's kingdom. Just little ones. Jesus emphasizes that point throughout this section, in verse 3 ("little children"), verse 4 ("like this child"), verse 5 ("a little child"), verse 6 ("one of these little ones"), verse 10 ("little ones"), and verse 14 ("little ones").

Friends, there's only one way into the realm of God's eternal blessing, and that's to get down low and become something a self-absorbed sinner doesn't want to become, *a little one*. Little kids don't have power or influence. They're totally dependent on others. Jesus here isn't referring to a child's innocence, but to his weakness and need, for they're certainly not innocent but "vipers in diapers," as a friend of mine puts it!

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,” said Jesus earlier, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” We enter the world thinking life is all about us. In God’s kingdom it’s all about Him, so if you want to enter it you need to *change*—that’s Jesus’ word in verse 3—and become *like little children*.

There’s no other way. No one enters God’s kingdom because they deserve it, but only by getting down low (they “humble themselves”) and doing what helpless little kids do so well. *They ask for help*.

Jesus came to seek and save people who need help, the lost. It’s why He died on the cross, to pay sin’s penalty for every helpless sinner who would call on Him, and He conquered death and secured victory for them over sin and death.

If only they would ask. That’s how you enter God’s kingdom. You must become a little one. That’s point one.

## II. To live rightly in God’s kingdom, you must care for other little ones (Matt 18:5-35).

That’s the point of the rest of the chapter. If you belong to God’s kingdom, which means you have become a little one, then you have a responsibility to other little ones. Again, when Jesus says “little ones” here, He’s not talking simply about little kids. He’s talking about God’s kids of all ages. Little ones, as verse 6 indicates, are people who believe in Jesus. So little ones are Christians.

Jesus makes it clear what’s supposed to happen in God’s kingdom. Little ones are to take care of other little ones. How? Jesus says we have three basic responsibilities.

**A. Make sure you treat little ones as if they were Christ (5).** That’s what He says in verse 5, “And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.” In God’s family, we’re all just little ones. The only reason we’re in the family is because God heard our helpless cry and came to our rescue. And that’s what He asks of us, to treat other little ones the same way.

Welcome them. Accept them. Care for them. Help them. Open your hearts and lives to little ones, says Jesus, *in my name*, as if they were me.

That’s putting it in positive terms. In verses 6-20 Jesus puts the responsibility in negative terms. He tells us what we’re *not* to do.

**B. Make sure you don’t cause another little one to sin (6-20).** He says in verse 6, “But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”

I guarantee you don’t want that to happen. You don’t want somebody to tie a huge stone around your neck and throw you into the ocean. But here’s something even worse. Jesus said it would be better to be the person with the rock around his neck than to be someone who causes one of God’s little ones to sin.

It’s bad enough to sin, to know what pleases God and flat out choose not to do it. It’s worse, says Jesus, unthinkable worse, to cause someone else to sin.

I want to tell you a true story. I ministered in a funeral service several years ago for a young woman that committed suicide. It was the final bad decision in a trail of bad decisions. Yet here’s the tragedy of it all. You can trace a lot of her poor decisions back to decisions she had nothing to do with. It started with the decision her father made when, as she was heading into her formative teenage years, he abandoned his family for the thrill of a younger woman. And then came the decision her mother made, when out

of spite for her ex-husband, she manifested bitterness and quickly jumped into another marriage. Not surprisingly, the rebound marriage didn't last. But what did last was the domino effect of sin in the lives of the kids who began to follow in their parents' steps.

"Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin!" says Jesus in verse 7. "Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!" Jesus refers to that which "causes another to sin" in verses 6, 7, 8, & 9. It happens all the time in the world, but it should never happen in the life of a little one. *Make sure*, says Jesus to His little ones, *that you do not cause another little one to sin.*

So how can we prevent that from happening? Jesus tells us. Instead of causing sin, we're supposed to deal with sin. Where? And how? Jesus tells us by mapping out three situations.

*1. Deal with sin in your own life (7-9).* That's where you start, as Jesus makes plain in verses 8-9, "If your hand or your foot causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell."

In other words, if you want to make sure you don't cause another little one to sin, you can't be passive, but rather, you must take action, even drastic action, to get rid of the causes of sin in your own life. Men, if you don't want to scar the little ones in your life, then stop flirting with that woman at work, get some boundaries in place, and if your marriage has gone sour, then take the initiative and get some help! And ladies, don't let the root of bitterness develop in your heart, no matter what your husband does to you. There are little eyes watching you, and learning, and imitating, and the last thing you ever want to do is to cause a little one to sin.

We don't do that in God's kingdom. We're called to treat little ones as if they were Christ. Which means we don't cause other little ones to sin. Which means we deal with sin at the prevention stage, as soon as we see it coming, starting in our own lives.

But we don't stop there. Jesus gives a second situation.

*2. Deal with sin when a little one goes astray (10-14).* I think that's the point Jesus is making in verses 10-14. He begins with this charge in verse 10, "See that you do not look down on one of these little ones." Again, when Jesus says 'little ones,' He's not talking about little kids, but all of God's children, regardless of their age.<sup>1</sup> Don't you dare look down on one of your brothers and sisters, no matter what.

Why not? Jesus gives an interesting reason at the end of verse 10, "For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven." That's encouraging. Jesus says that little ones have angels, "their angels," says Jesus. Hebrews 1:14 says that angels are "ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation."

The point seems to be this. If angels are caring for God's children, then so must we. And you don't do that by looking down on them.

Answer this. When do we tend to look down on another Christian? It's often when he or she is struggling with sin, right? I wonder what the angels think about some of the conversations they hear God's people having after church over the Sunday meal...

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<sup>1</sup> In the next section He'll actually use family language, "brother" in verse 15 and "brother" in verse 35. In the next section He'll actually use family language, "brother" in verse 15 and "brother" in verse 35.

“Hey, did you see the clothes that woman wore to church today?! I wouldn’t be caught dead in that outfit. And she calls herself a Christian!”

“Well, I don’t know what our deacons are thinking, but how can they not do something about Rick? He hasn’t been to church in, what, two months? And when I passed him in the aisle at WalMart last week, I’m sure I smelled alcohol on his breath! That man is a terrible example for our kids.”

Listen again to Jesus. *See to it that you do not look down on one of these little ones.* What? Is Jesus saying we should ignore sin problems, like dressing immodestly, missing church, and getting drunk? Not at all. That kind of living isn’t pleasing to Him, as His Word makes clear. But this text makes it clear that this doesn’t please Him either, *when one little one looks down on another little one who’s gone astray in sin.*

That’s not how you deal with sin in God’s family. How then? Here’s how. Listen to Jesus’ parable in verses 12-14, “What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.”

There’s how you deal with sin in a brother’s life. Not by looking down on him, not by gossiping about him over Sunday dinner, but by *going after him.*

I hope when you come to church you’re looking out for people who are *not* here. Sure, visit the 99, and thank God for them. But don’t forget the 1. Get on the phone this afternoon. Take him to lunch this week. Go after the one that’s straying and help him deal with his sin.

Did you realize that you can contribute to a brother’s sin by not doing anything? I think that’s Jesus’ point here. Remember His warning. *Make sure you do not cause a little one to sin.* And then He tells this parable about a shepherd going after a stray sheep.<sup>2</sup> The connection? If we don’t go after a struggling brother, we by our lack of action are in essence contributing to his sin.

Friends, the Scriptures make it very clear what is supposed to happen...

Galatians 6:1 “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.”

James 5:19–20 “My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.”

We’re not supposed to cause sin. We’re called to deal with it. First, in our own lives. Next, when a fellow little one goes astray. And thirdly...

3. *Deal with sin when a little one sins against you (15-20).* Not Jesus gets really personal. He says in verse 15, “If your brother.” He was talking about “little ones.” Now it’s your “brother.” It’s same idea, only more personal. This is family.

“If your brother sins against you.” Some manuscripts don’t have “against you,” just, “If your brother sins.” We’re talking about a clear sin problem here. It’s not that your brother is merely doing something that *you* don’t like, but something that your mutual Father forbids His children to do. Your brother has *sinned.*

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<sup>2</sup> In the context the stray sheep is another little one, a fellow Christian. It’s not a non-Christian as in a similar parable in Luke 15:3-7.

What's supposed to happen when your brother sins and you know about it? Say, "it's none of my business"? No. Call your pastor, or deacon? No. Tell your best friend what he's done? No. Just pray about it? Sure, pray, but no, don't *just* pray. Jesus says that you are to *go* and *show*.

"Go"—you take the initiative. Even though he sinned, you go to him. And "show him his fault." This isn't a social call, and though you should be friendly and kind, your brother is in trouble. Your mutual Father is not pleased with something in His life and you are doing for him what you would want him to do for you, were the tables turned. You're on a rescue mission. He has a hand or foot that's causing him to sin, and Jesus just said it's better to enter life maimed than to be thrown into hell with two hands and two feet.

This is serious! Another little one, your own *brother*, is in sin. And apparently, he either doesn't see the seriousness of his predicament, or doesn't know what to do about it. So you've come to help him, "just between the two of you." This is a private meeting, two brothers looking eye to eye, having a serious conversation.

"Lenny, I'm concerned. Maybe I'm missing something, but it seems to me that you are having trouble speaking the truth. We've had three meetings in the past couple of months and you've been 20 minutes late for two of them and didn't even show for the third, without offering any reason or acknowledging fault. Our Father tells us in Ephesians 4:25 that we are to speak the truth to each other. I feel like you haven't been doing that with me. What do you think?"

That's what Jesus says should happen. If my brother sins, I am to go to him. Then what? If he doesn't listen to you, if he just blows you off, you have another responsibility, and talk about it in a moment. But what if he does listen, meaning, he takes to heart your loving rebuke, and asks forgiveness? Then Jesus says you've won your brother.

What if he sins again? You go again. And if he repents, you forgive again. And if he sins again, you go again. And if he repents, you forgive again. How many times? That's the very question Peter asked in verse 21, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" And Jesus' reply? You know it. Verse 22, "Not seven times, but seventy times."

Now, before we look at the process of church discipline, I want you to see how it fits into the flow of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18. Jesus says that to enter His kingdom, you must become a little one, since there are no big shots when He's the King.

So you call on the King, and ask Him to save you. And He does. By His grace, you become a little child in God's family. And once that happens, you now have a responsibility to take care of other little ones in the family. You're supposed to treat them like they are Christ, and by means, make sure you don't contribute to sin in their lives. And that means you deal with sin in your own life, and then you deal with it when another little one goes astray, and particularly you deal with it when that little one sins against you.

And if he repents...

**C. Make sure you forgive a little one whenever he asks (21-35).** And lest we miss the point, Jesus finishes with another parable, this one about a king who forgave a servant with a ten million dollar debt. He forgave him on the basis of mercy, just because he asked. But the servant did the unthinkable. He found another servant who owed him

\$300, and refused to hear his cry for mercy, and had him thrown in prison. And when the king heard about it, he called him a *wicked servant*, and turned him over to the jailer, with this question ringing in his ear, “Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you (33)?”

Now let’s talk implications. The fact is, very few churches practice church discipline like Jesus said we’re to do in Matthew 18. Often because they’ve had a bad experience with it, but usually because they misunderstand it, and see it as something judgmental and inconsistent with love. But I want you to think about this statement...

*If we really believe Christ, we will view church discipline as a good gift to help us fight our battle with sin.* Isn’t that Jesus’ point in Matthew 18? His instructions in verses 15-20 are His gift to us to help us fight our battle with sin.

Let’s address three important questions.

**Question #1: What are the prerequisites to church discipline?**

There are three things that must be in place if you’re going to practice church discipline the way the Lord intends.

1. *You must believe your Bible.* Friends, I’m not naïve. I know that loving confrontation is not easy to do. And I also know that we may do it wrongly at times. But that doesn’t change the fact that our Bible is filled with exhortations and examples that call for church discipline. For instance...

Luke 17:3-4 [Jesus says] “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.”

2 Thessalonians 3:14–15 “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.”

And there are others.<sup>3</sup> Friends, in order to do church discipline, you must believe your Bible. And because we do at WBC, we are committed to biblical church discipline.

2. *You must believe that church membership is a wonderful privilege.* At WBC we see church membership as just that, a great privilege! It’s not an entitlement, but an honor our Savior has won for us at great cost to Himself. He went through a terrible death to bring us into union with God *and* each other. And we value that union.

Friends, it’s not okay to say you believe in Jesus and then live in persistent disobedience to Him. That’s a mockery to His cross. When you join His church you are saying, I agree to live by His Word and for His honor, and when I fall short, I will confess my sin and celebrate the wonder of His forgiveness.

On a practical note, if a church doesn’t have a membership, it will be very difficult for that church to practice church discipline. Who will they discipline? Parents, do you discipline your neighbor’s kids? Probably not (unless they give you permission!). You discipline your own children, right? They belong to you. They’re under your authority and care.

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<sup>3</sup> See Leviticus 19:17 “Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt.” 1 Corinthians 5:2 “And you are proud! Shouldn’t you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?” Titus 3:10 “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. <sup>11</sup> You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.”



That's the way church discipline works, too. To practice church discipline as God intends, you must view church membership as a wonderful privilege.

3. *You must love your brother more than yourself.* It's risky to go after a brother in sin. He might respond with *more sin*. So it's safer to just stay away and not get involved. But we're not called to live safe lives. We're called to deny ourselves and love each other, no matter what the risk.

### **Question #2: What are the procedures for church discipline?**

Take a look at Matthew 18 and you'll see the procedure involves four potential steps.

1. *If your brother sins, go and confront him alone (Matt 18:15; Gal 6:1).* Just you and him, one on one. What's your aim? Jesus says, "If he *listens to you*, you have *won your brother over*." So your goal is to see him listen to you and say, "You know, you're right. I agree with you. I've been wrong, and I acknowledge it to you and to God. Will you forgive me?" That's the goal. Not to make him hurt for how he has hurt you. The goal is reconciliation. The goal is to recover your brother.

2. *If he doesn't repent, go again with one or two others (Matt 18:16; Deut 19:15).* That's verse 16, "But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'"

Why go back with witnesses? It's a safeguard to insure no one is blackmailed and railroaded out of the church by a false accusation. One person is not permitted to bring an accusation to the church against a brother. First, it must be substantiated as a valid sin problem and not merely a *perceived* problem, hence, the visit by one or two witnesses.

But there's a practical benefit too. You want your brother to see more than one set of concerned and caring eyes. You are important to us. You must deal with this.

3. *If he still doesn't repent, inform the church (Matt 18:17a).* Verse 17, "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church." For us, this typically happens in a Sunday evening service. The purpose of informing the church is to encourage the church membership to pray for and seek the restoration of the unrepentant brother. A period of time is allowed for the church members to seek to make contact with the wayward brother and warn him, desiring to see genuine repentance demonstrated.

By the way, please realize that every Christian is responsible to do this recovery work, not just church leaders. It's not just the pastor's job, nor the deacons. In fact, pastors and deacons don't discipline someone. The *church* does. Leaders lead, yes, but the church takes action.

So when the church does discipline someone, it's inappropriate for a church member to say, "Look what the deacons did to that person." No, discipline is a ministry of the church.

4. *If he won't listen to the church, treat him as an unbeliever (Matt 18:17b).* "And if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." Pagan or tax collector? What's that mean? Jesus isn't telling us to look down on the person, or shun him. He's just saying to treat him like a non-believer, for by his actions he is refusing to believe and obey the Scriptures. How do we treat non-believers? The Scriptures call us to love them, pray for them, and do all we can to see them reconciled to God, and that's what we're going to do for the person we remove from membership. We want to see him restored!

That brings us to our third question.

### **Question #3: What is the purpose of church discipline?**

1. *The goal is to restore our brother.* It's not to punish him, but to see him come back to the fold. And he holds the key to coming back—we're not stiff-arming him. All he has to do is repent of his sin, and we're ready to restore him with open arms. That's true at every step of the process. The goal is to see a wayward sheep come home, to be *restored*.

Beloved, don't miss this. It's not a person's initial sin that brings about his removal. It's his refusal to repent of that sin, a refusal he has demonstrated at least four times before he's removed. Having said that, restoration isn't the only goal...

2. *The goal is to protect the church.* "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough," says Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:6. He said that to a church that had a member that was living in known, unrepentant sin. "Get rid of the old yeast," Paul told them. "You must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, etc. With such a man do not even eat." Why not? The discipline isn't just for the man's good, so he'll come to his senses and repent. It's for the protection of the purity of the church, too. If you ignore sin, it just spreads and gets worse.

Perhaps you're thinking, "I'm struggling with this whole notion of church discipline. I don't like the sound of it." Let me ask you an important question. What is the alternative? What alternative does a church have to following the New Testament instructions regarding church discipline?

Paul VanGorder answers that critical question, "We must not overlook this solemn fact: if a church fails by indifference to exercise discipline where needed, or if it shields a guilty person to keep from offending an influential member, Christ will sooner or later take action."<sup>4</sup>

How do we know? Because of a picture presented in Revelation 2-3. Do you recall the portrait of Jesus given there? What was He doing when John the apostle saw Him? Revelation depicts Jesus as *walking among the lampstands*, a reference to *local churches*. Jesus is observing His churches, and in Revelation 2-3 He records what He sees. In some cases He commends the churches. In other cases He condemns them.

Here's what He said to the local church in Ephesus (Rev. 2:5), "Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place."

What did Jesus say He would do if the church failed to deal with its sin? He would come and remove its lampstand.

This is serious. Jesus Himself will remove the light of testimony from a local church that is disobedient to Him. When a church refuses to address a sin problem in the biblical manner, that sin problem spreads like leaven until eventually, the Lord Himself removes the lampstand from the assembly.

That is the alternative. And that's why, though painful, we must take action. But here's the main reason. It's not just for our brother's good, or the church's purity, but...

3. *The goal is to display the glory of God's character.* He is holy, so we must be holy. He hates sin, so we must hate sin. He loves the sinner, so we go after the sinner in love. He's forgiving, so we forgive. It's all about Him and reflecting the glory of His character.

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<sup>4</sup> Paul VanGorder, p. 31.