

The Goal of Church Discipline (Matthew 18:15-20)

How do we pastorally care for those members who are spiritually straying? Jesus instructs us on how to restore someone who has strayed as we just heard in today's reading. Then He teaches us about the importance of forgiving anyone who sins against us.

Modern churches do not usually exercise church discipline as churches in the past have done. At least this is true in the formal sense of the term church discipline. However, modern Christians probably do exercise more informal discipline over one another than most of us realize, and this is the best kind of church discipline. Informal discipline may limit knowledge of the offense to the smallest number of persons possible, thereby minimizing the damage and the needless talk about the event. However, there may still be occasions in which church congregations must exercise discipline over their members.

Okay, let's begin with a definition of forgiveness. In Biblical teaching, there are two emphases in the term forgiveness: (1) the removal of the barrier of sin and (2) the restoration of fellowship. The offense committed forms a barrier between a person and God and between two people, thereby alienating the two. Forgiveness is the gracious act that removes that barrier and restores the fellowship of the people involved.

In the Old Testament, sin is against God. Consequently, only God can forgive sin. Sin may be a transgression against God, disobedience to God's law, unbelief, rebellion, or something else. It is a barrier that stands in the way of fellowship between a person and God, and like a stain, it demands cleansing or removing. To forgive sin means (1) to send it away, (2) to lift it up as one would lift a burden, (3) to cover it, or (4) to blot it out.

The Goal of Church Discipline

page 3 of 9

In the New Testament, there are some distinctively new ideas about forgiveness. Jesus forgave sins “in his own name,” thereby incurring the charge of blasphemy, since only God can forgive sin. Jesus taught that people cannot know the forgiveness of God unless they are willing to forgive others.

Evidently, one who is not sensitive enough to understand the suffering in the conscience of the sinner is not able to accept God’s forgiveness.

Jesus taught that repentance preceded forgiveness, as in the case of the Pharisee and the publican.

When asked how often a person must forgive, Jesus responded that a person must forgive 70 times 7 times. One of the clearest insights in the New Testament is that it is a personal act, never a legal act.

Our Scripture reading today deals with church discipline and forgiveness. When Jesus instructed his disciples about settling disputes between brother,

he first advised the offended party to take the initiative

The Goal of Church Discipline
4 of 9

page

and go to the offender in a personal attempt to solve the problem. Jesus said, “If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.” It should be noted that this method limits the knowledge and, consequently, the damage of the offense to the smallest number of persons. If the two people are reconciled at this point, there is no reason for anyone else to know about the problem.

If this first step fails, the Christian is to take two or more brothers with him and try again to talk to the offending brother. This method accomplishes three things: (1) it provides witnesses who will know exactly what was said and be able to overcome the subjective prejudice of the two members; (2) it will therefore offer a better opportunity for settling the original problem; and (3) it will still limit the knowledge of the problem to a small circle of people.

If both attempts fail, the offended one is to tell the problem in the church. There are several implications

The Goal of Church Discipline

page 5 of 9

in this action. The action assumes that both people are members of the church and that their membership means something to them. It implies that the church, like a family, is involved when two of its members are at odds with each other. It seems to imply that the congregation will care enough to want to settle the problem, thereby redeeming both persons involved and the fellowship of the congregation. It should be noted, however, that reporting personal difficulties to the church is a last resort, this is to be done only after all other attempts have failed.

When reconciliation is not achieved even in the context of a church hearing, Jesus advised that the church should regard the offended as an “outsider.” This implies that, in the teaching of Jesus, there is no notion that the church would do any kind of

punishing. The severest action is to regard the offender as outside the fellowship.

The Goal of Church Discipline
6 of 9

page

It is significant that Jesus, after stressing the importance of people's actions on earth and in the church, which has the power of binding and loosing in heaven, went on immediately to answer Peter's question about forgiveness. Peter asked, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but 70 times 7."

Just as Jesus Christ came to reconcile sinful people to God, so he left his church as a reconciling agent in the world. He entrusted to us "the message of reconciliation" as it is called in 2 Corinthians 5:19.

The church is made up of those who have been forgiven by God. They have learned the meaning of forgiveness, and they forgive one another. The

church, as such, is in the business of forgiving. All around the church, there are individuals and families estranged from each other and are desperately needing help in the

The Goal of Church Discipline
7 of 9

page

achievement of forgiveness. The church knows best how to do this and should be diligent in the practice.

To care for other persons and deal with their offenses is not necessarily meddling. It takes a lot of courage and concern for a Christian to go to another person who has offended him and attempt to settle that problem before it becomes serious. Our Scripture reading indicates that if any individual or small group will go the offending person at an early state, they may save him and prevent him from going deeper into the wrong, thereby hurting himself and others. Our reading suggests that knowledge of personal difficulties should be restricted to the smallest number of persons possible. Confession of

sin is the honest acknowledgement of it to the person or persons against whom the act is done. Disclosure of such information beyond this circle is not confession but publicity.

The Goal of Church Discipline
8 of 9

page

Our reading indicates that Christians are responsible for their brothers and sisters and on occasion must do the very difficult task of going to an offender to try to solve a serious problem. It may seem unfair that the offended person must take the initiative, but in reality, that person is more able to take up the problem because of his or her sensitivity to the wrong. Also, it is possible that the offender is not aware that he or she has offended. The single most important emphasis of these passages is that the church may have to exercise discipline over its members, but when it does, it must do so with the goal of reconciling the person or persons involved.

So, what are some other lessons we can learn from this Scripture reading from Matthew?

This passage encourages individuals to confront those who have wronged them privately first. This fosters understanding and reconciliation without escalating the conflict publicly. It also highlights the collective

The Goal of Church Discipline
page 9 of 9

responsibility of the church to maintain harmony by involving others to help mediate the situation. The ultimate goal is restoration of relationships, not punishment, with the emphasis on forgiveness. And finally, these lessons underscore the importance of maintaining unity and love within the community, reflecting the teachings of Jesus on interpersonal relationships.

Please bow your heads as I pray.

Heavenly Father, may the words of Jesus Christ dwell in me richly, and help me to speak the truth in love in every situation that I may face. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in your

sight, my Rock and my Redeemer. May Jesus lead and guide all my intercessions and prayers, my conversations, and communion with others, both individual or corporately. As I gather with other brothers and sisters to pray and praise you, I thank you that Christ is the Head in our midst. May all I say and do be honoring to you. We ask this in the name of your Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.