

Church Discipline – Spanking Ourselves So God Doesn’t Have To – Part I

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*For this series, we’ve relied heavily on the books *Shepherdology* by Pastor John MacArthur (M) and *Handbook of Church Discipline* by Jay Adams (A)*

Introduction

A new believer was invited to attend a "Young Adult Fellowship". When he arrived at the home of the young adult who attended his church and who hosted the fellowship, he was ushered to the basement.

The fellowship was much different than this new believer expected. The music was the same kind he listened to before becoming a Christian. The conversation held by those attending the party was certainly different than what it was a few days earlier at church. Their behavior was at odds with how they conducted themselves at Sunday school and choir rehearsal. Here, the guys were eyeballing the girls and the girls were checking out the guys.

This was *called* a “Young Adult Fellowship” but it was the same old stuff. This new believer was discouraged. He thought this gathering was going to be different--He was trying to get away from the very things that the Lord saved him from—but this party brought him back to “square one.”

That young man was me almost thirty years ago and I have since discovered that the activity at this “Young Adult Fellowship” was indicative of the spiritual climate of the church the young people attended. People were going to church on Sunday but living no different from the world Monday thru Saturday.

Sadly, what church folk were doing behind closed doors 30 years ago is today paraded in the pews and in the public spotlight.

- A pastor has a “love child” by a couple of women and is openly admired, respected and defended by his followers. Related to this is the stigma and blight of pastors who commit multiple adulteries and have only to say they are sorry in order to continue shepherding their flocks.
- Today church leaders who openly flaunt their homosexuality are allowed to stay in the ministry.
- Today church leaders have been indicted for using their trusted positions to abuse children. The sad thing is, if it wasn’t for our court system throwing many of these people behind bars, they would still be at their churches.¹

It is both disturbing and sad that many of the sins found in today’s church among those who profess to be followers of Christ, are the same sins that characterized the lives of many *before* they became Christians.

(1 Cor 6:9 NKJV) Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites,

(1 Cor 6:10 NKJV) nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.

(1 Cor 6:11 NKJV) And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.

¹ <http://wjz.com/topstories/pastor.sex.abuse.2.429519.html>

Paul says in verse 11, “*And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.*”

The sinful habits that Christ delivered the first century church from are becoming the norm in the 21st century church.

In Ephesians 5 the Apostle Paul tells us that Jesus will one day “*present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless*”.

The church will be presented by Christ as “holy and blameless” because Christ is holy and blameless. This will happen in the future in heaven because it has already been accomplished in the present.

The truth of the matter is that believers are *right now* “clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ” so it is His holiness and blameless that is seen, not ours.

Theologians call this “positional righteousness.” The person who is in Christ is *right now* a “new creation—old things are passed away and all things have become new.” The believer is *right now* “complete in Christ.” Christ has become our “wisdom from God, righteousness, sanctification and redemption.” That is *positional righteousness*—our position or standing in Christ.

But then there is a *practical* righteousness that God is concerned with for the believer. There is a practical holiness or what I will call the, “everyday practice of right living” that God requires of the believer.

- We are commanded to “*Walk in the light and He is in the light*”
- God’s Word tells us to, “*Yield our members of instruments of righteousness unto God.*”
- The Apostle Peter tells his readers to, “*Be holy as He (God) Himself is holy.*”
- The Apostle John in his first letter writes, “*The one who says he abides in Him (Christ) so ought to walk as he walked.*” Later in this letter John tells us to “*...keep ourselves pure as He (Christ) is pure.*”

God has made us positionally righteous in Christ but He also requires us to practice *daily righteousness*. Our everyday actions must reflect our position and standing in Christ.

To encourage His church along in this direction, God has left the church with two ways or methods of maintaining her practical purity:

1.) *Preach and Teach the Word of God.*

Psalm 119:9 NKJV - How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word.

Ephesians 5:25-26 - ... Christ ... loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word,

2 Timothy 3:16-17 NKJV - All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 4:2 NKJV - Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.

But preaching and teaching holiness will not bring about purity in the church if there is an indifference to how people respond. For example, in your home you give your child commands such as, “*Clean up your room.*” “*Come to eat when called.*” “*Come inside when the street lights turn on.*”

These commands will not bring about consistent obedience if the parent ignores a rebellious response. The parent must enforce the rules of the home.

Thus Scripture teaches us in passages like Matthew 18, Acts 5, 1 Corinthians 5, and 2 Thessalonians 3 that the church is not only to teach and preach the commands of God, the church is to *enforce* a biblical standard of holiness throughout the body of Christ.

This leads us to the second of the two ways God has instructed the church to keep herself pure:

2.) *Enforce the Word of God*

It isn't enough to make announcements or post rules. Proverbs 3:11-12 says, “*My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor detest His correction; For whom the LORD loves He corrects, Just as a father the son in whom he delights.*”

My wife posts chore charts in our home. We have discussed with our children how they ought to talk to one another. They know that they are not to lay a hand on each other. Nevertheless, they disobey our rules and must be disciplined.

As a parent must discipline to correct his children, so the Lord must discipline His children. You just don't tell Johnny not to do something without communicating the consequences. And you just don't communicate the consequences without following through when the rule is broken.

The combined practice of *Teaching the Word of God* and *Enforcing the Word of God* is what is called *church discipline*.

Church discipline is not solely *church punishment*. Some parents just punish their children. When a child acts up or disobeys, the strap is applied. Oftentimes the child is left wondering, “*What did I do?*” This is because the parent failed to communicate up front what he or she expected from the child.

If instituted biblically, church discipline can be viewed *as church maintenance* or *preventive discipline*.

In his book, *Handbook of Church Discipline*, Jay Adams writes that discipline is a two-edged sword. It has a preventive side and a corrective side. Preventive discipline involves teaching truth in such a way that it promotes godliness.

Adams further writes, “When Christians are fed a regular diet of truth from the Scripture in such a way that they grow by it, there will be far less need for remedial or corrective discipline in a church.”

In other words, when Christians are constantly “examining themselves” in light of the scriptural truths and principals being taught by their shepherds, and as they are being held accountable for their conduct by other believers in the local assembly, then the need for the formal, more strict measures of church discipline won't be necessary.

The Scripture puts it this way, in 1 Corinthians 11:31-32, “*For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged but when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.*”

Over the next three Sundays we will be looking at what the Bible teaches concerning church discipline. We will be looking at how the church purifies itself—how the church keeps itself spiritually and morally clean.

I. Elements of Church Discipline - Part One

A. The Place of Discipline

The place of discipline is the assembly of believers-- the church. There are several scriptural passages, which instruct us in how discipline is to take place in the church.

In Matthew 18, Jesus tells His disciples how they were to respond when a fellow believer sinned against them. Here we learn that the response to an unrepentant sinning member may progress until it ultimately includes the entire assembly of believers seeking to restore the sinning member to his or her walk with Christ.

Mat 18:15 "And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.

*Mat 18:16 "But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that **BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED.***

Mat 18:17 "And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer.

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul comes down hard on the Corinthian believers for taking each other to court:

6:1-6 - Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? ... Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren, but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers?

Paul was saying in effect “Why are you going to an inferior court of unregenerate men to settle the affairs of the church when you yourselves are going to judge the world?”

What he was saying was that the church is ultimately the highest court there is. The principal Paul lays down here is that church discipline is to occur within the community of the followers of Jesus Christ. The place of discipline is in the church-among God’s people.

We’ve looked at the *place* of church discipline; now let’s look at the *purpose* of discipline.

B. The Purpose of Discipline (2 Purposes)

1.) *Prevention – The fear of sinning*

There was a church where church discipline wasn't being taught. People were not being held accountable for putting into practice the things that they were being taught.

- They were being taught that fornication was wrong but the leaders seemed to ignore the fact that there were those in the church who were living in sin. (1 Thess. 4:6)
- They were being taught that church members should put their spiritual gifts to work but the elders refused to deal with leaders who were slothful when it came to serving. (1 Peter 4:10)
- They were being taught that Christians should not “*forsake the assembling of believers together*” on the Lord’s Day but the elders would not face those who had attendance problems. (Hebrews 10:23)

One reason the elders gave for not practicing church discipline was that they didn’t believe that they were called by God to be "junior Holy Spirits" – monitoring the affairs of each others lives. But they had missed the whole point of what the Scriptures teach is the purpose for church discipline.

The goal of church discipline is not to throw people out, embarrass them, be self-righteous, play God, or exercise authority and power in some unbiblical manner. The purpose of discipline is to bring people back into a pure relationship and fellowship within the assembly.

This is precisely what Paul teaches as one of the reasons for the Word of God:

(2 Timothy 3:16-17 NKJV) - All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

The Christian life is like a road. According to 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Scripture is given to us to help us along our way.

1. *Doctrine/teaching* – What the road is
2. *Reproof/rebuking* – When you get off the road
3. *Correction* – How to get back on the road
4. *Instruction/training* – How to stay on the road

God doesn’t want His children to sin thus He gives His church the process of discipline for the purpose of *prevention*. Why should He have to deal with sin in the life of a believer when He can keep it from happening? God doesn’t want us to veer off the road of righteousness.

In Acts 5, church discipline was carried out by the Apostles.

(Acts 5:1 NKJV) ...a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession.

(Acts 5:2 NKJV) And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet.

(Acts 5:3 NKJV) But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?"

(Acts 5:4 NKJV) "While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."

(Acts 5:5 NKJV) Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things.

(Acts 5:7 NKJV) Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

(Acts 5:8 NKJV) And Peter answered her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" She said, "Yes, for so much."

(Acts 5:9 NKJV) Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out."

(Acts 5:10 NKJV) Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband.

(Acts 5:11 NKJV) So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.

Notice the reoccurring theme in Acts chapter five, verses 5 and 11: *"Fear came upon all the church who heard these things."* What kind of fear? I believe it was the fear of sinning.

I believe that as a result of the discipline of this husband and wife, the people became afraid to sin. The fear of the Lord is a deterrent to sin. Listen to what the Bible says about the fear of the Lord:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1:7)

The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; Pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverted mouth, I hate. (Proverbs 8:13)

The fear of the LORD prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be shortened. (Proverbs 10:27)

The Christian is to love the Lord but he is also to fear the Lord—these are not mutually exclusive; they are truths that complement one another.

As a boy growing up I loved my mother, but I also feared my mother. She instilled the "fear of mama" in me and the rest of her children before we could even utter our first sentence.

But sadly today in many of our churches, the "fear of the Lord" has been lost. We will see as we move further along in this mini-series that God instills the fear of the Lord in His people when church discipline is practiced.

1 Timothy chapter 5 teaches this truth. Here the Apostle Paul commanded Timothy to discipline a sinning elder and the result would prevent the rest of the church, especially the other elders, from sinning.

Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also may be fearful of sinning. (1 Timothy 5:19-20)

The first purpose of church discipline is prevention; the second purpose is *restoration*.

2.) *Restoration.*

Mat 18:15 "And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother."

Notice in Matthew 18, verse 15 the word "gained/won." The Greek term spoke of accumulating wealth in the sense of financial commodities. This verse pictures the sinning brother as a loss of valuable treasure. (M)

When a brother or sister in Christ sins it is like losing valuable treasure. Each soul is a treasure to God. He gave His only Son so that that person would be saved. The church needs to have that same sense of concern for a brother or sister in sin._

You may have seen on a news program how an entire community rises up to search for a child who is lost or has been abducted. This is the kind of response a congregation should have when one of its own falls in sin. We need to go after that person win that person back from the clutches of the devil.

Galatians 6:1 says: *"Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass [Gk., **paraptoma**, "a fall into sin"], you who are spiritual, restore such a one."*

Notice that Paul writes, *"You who are spiritual restore such a one..."* The word "restore" comes from the Greek word (*katartizo*) that conveys the idea of repairing something to bring it back to its original condition. The Greek word is used to refer to process of mending fractured bones, putting dislocated bones in place and mending fishing nets.

When Paul uses the word restore, he is referring to the process of church discipline where a sinning believer is brought back to spiritual health and vitality.

Normally, you don't view a doctor as your enemy. We normally view a doctor as one who is looking after our best interests. Church discipline keeps the body of Christ healthy and holy.

In Hebrew 10:24, the writer exhorts the believer to *"consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds."* The KJV uses the word "provoke"; another word that is used is "irritate".

The picture here is a rider on a horse in a race using his spurs, digging them into the side of his horse to make it run faster. The pain from the spurs of the rider provokes the horse to run faster.

On a spiritual plain, we need to spur one another on to love and good deeds. Church discipline helps to accomplish this.

In James 5:19-20 we find this exhortation: *"My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back [restore], let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins."*

No man is an island. What you do impacts somebody, somewhere. A man with the habit of gambling can destroy his family. A church leader, who has a love for money or lacks self control when it comes to sex, can destroy thousands of lives.

Church discipline keeps the body of Christ healthy and holy.

We've looked at the Place of Discipline and the Purpose of Discipline, let's conclude by looking at the *Person of Discipline*.

C. The Person of Discipline

In Matthew 18:15 Jesus says, "*And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.*"

We have already found that church discipline isn't left to a court or a committee. The believer in the local assembly is the one who is commanded to practice it. Discipline is not just for church officials; it's for everyone from the pulpit to the pews; from leadership to laity.

In fact, Galatians 6:1 tells us exactly who should do it: "*Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, you who are spiritual restore such a one.*" In other words, you who are walking in the Spirit, you who are obeying the Word, and you who are in fellowship with the Lord should restore the fallen brother or sister.

One reason why many don't want to practice this level of accountability is that they are not walking in the Spirit; they are not obeying the Word and they are not in fellowship with the Lord.

It is very convicting to approach a brother or sister about sin in their life when you are involved in sinful behavior yourself.

How should church discipline be performed? Paul says, "*In the spirit of meekness, considering yourself, lest you also be tempted.*" Paul tells us that one should have the proper attitude.

We need to humble ourselves realizing that we could find ourselves in the same mess. The Scripture says, "*Pride comes before destruction and an arrogant spirit before a fall.*" A prideful attitude could land you in the same sinful pit as your brother or sister.

Paul says, "*Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, you who are spiritual restore such a one.*"

The purity of the church should be every Christian's concern. We all need to humbly and lovingly confront that which makes it impure when we become aware of it.

Don't just say, "*Pastor, we're praying for so-and-so that he'll see the light.*" That may not be enough. You've got the light-- take it and shine it in his eyes! (M)

I don't know about you, but I need the accountability. I need some brothers and sisters who are not only praying for me but love me enough to seek my spiritual welfare. I need some brothers and sisters who care enough about me to ask those hard questions about my walk with Christ.

"How's your thought life?"

"How's your prayer life?"

"What are you studying from the Scriptures?"

"How are you and your wife doing?"

"Are you spending enough time with your family?"

"When was the last time you talked to someone about Jesus?"

I need people to hold me accountable for living a holy life. I need people to take me aside when it's necessary and reprove me *in private* about something in my life that doesn't honor Christ.

The *persons of discipline* are those who are walking in the Spirit, who are obeying the Word, and who are in fellowship with the Lord—these are the ones who God has called to restore the fallen brother or sister.

R.C. Sproul writes, “*The church is called not only to a ministry of reconciliation, but a ministry of nurture to those within her gates. Part of that nurture includes church discipline...*”

The idea of church discipline is totally consistent with two of the basic purposes of the church—evangelism and discipleship.

Evangelism ministers to those outside the church who are in bondage to sin to bring them to faith in Christ where the transformation process begins.

The discipleship process is designed to build up believers so they can be conformed to the image and character of Christ.

Church discipline as a part of the discipleship process ministers to those within the body of Christ who are dominated by some area of sin. This ministry helps the sin-sick believer experience liberation from sin’s power through fellowship with Christ.

In view of these processes, Professor Dr. Carl Laney states, “Church discipline may be broadly defined as the confrontive and corrective measures taken by an individual, church leaders, or the congregation regarding a matter of sin in the life of a believer.”

In other words, an individual or church leader or the congregation must not only be willing to confront someone in sin but go through the process of restoring the sinner to a healthy Christian lifestyle and walk with Jesus Christ.

Discipline in the church is not punishment. It is discipline and discipline is designed to train and restore. We will look at this more next time.

Go further...

<http://elbourne.org/archives/2005/08/05/speaking-of-church-discipline/>