



“Discipline in the Church”

Idea: Loving church discipline yields life, health, holiness, and growth.

Intro: There is an amazing thing that happens to first-time parents. After a long and tumultuous nine months, the anticipation of a newborn baby culminates in a determined shrill. The first cry of an infant serves as a call for care, support, protection, and love. In that moment, there is nothing else more important for those new parents.

When Kara and I experienced this beautiful event over fourteen years ago, it was amazing. We had no idea what we were doing. We had celebrated and walked with our friends who were having children, but none of that really prepares you for becoming a parent yourself. For us, and probably most people, we liked children. We enjoyed holding and playing with babies. It was neat to observe milestones with our friends as their babies and toddlers took their first steps, cut their first teeth, and became potty-trained. We, however, sat on the outside and looked in from afar, so the affection we felt was different than the parents of these children. Therefore, as Kara endured an agitated pregnancy, she simply longed for it to be over. Morning sickness had become an unwelcome way of life for her. Then, unexpectedly, our baby girl decided she would make her grand appearance five weeks early. It was 10pm on a Saturday night. I was supposed to preach the next morning. Nothing was ready in the nursery at our new home. Everything was still in boxes. None of that mattered though. She was coming and would not be denied. So, two frantic and young parents rushed off to the hospital.

Over the next several hours, we waited in the delivery room. Labor pains were brutal. Anxiety was high. Anticipation was strong. In the back of our minds, we wondered about what would happen next. We questioned our ability to care for the child we were about to hold. No longer were we standing on the outside looking in. This moment was real, and it was ours. So, when the doctor handed Hailey to us, miraculously the pain was gone, anxiety had dissipated, and our anticipation was satisfied in the most precious face we had ever seen. There was an instantaneous love for her that was otherworldly. From that moment forward, we knew that her care, support, and protection would be our focus because of our love.

Well, as the parents in the room understand, that precious and innocent little face very quickly learned how to test mom and dad. Her cute smiles and cooing morphed into a rebellious “no” as our infant turned into a toddler and entered the “terrible-twos.” In this new phase of life, we were faced with the dilemma of balancing discipline and love.

The reality is that love involves discipline. Regrettably, our culture misses this. Many people view love as a glob of gelatin, something with no center, no parts, and no hard edges. They think love is something that is free from all conditions, all expectations, all standards, and all judgments. The bumper sticker “♥+♥= Marriage”

articulates this understanding. Even in the church, we are tempted to pit love against law and truth, dividing the world into truth people and love people. The only problem is the Bible never does this.

...for the Lord reproveth him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights. – Proverbs 3:12

Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him. – Proverbs 13:24

Discipline your son, for there is hope; do not set your heart on putting him to death. – Proverbs 19:18

According to the Bible, failing to discipline our children is hating them. It is forsaking hope for them. It is being a willing party in their death. Love disciplines. Out of love, Kara and I had to learn to discipline our precious baby girl because she needed to know and follow God's commands as a way of life.

For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life.
– Proverbs 6:23

Regardless of how clear the Bible makes the argument for discipline, we would rather do almost anything other than discipline. We avoid it like the plague in our homes, in our relationships, and in the church. Why do we avoid it? Could it be that we do not understand what discipline is and the benefits it provides?

Inquiry: This summer we are studying the role, functions, and structures of the local church. So far, we have discussed mission, membership, and attendance in the church. Today, we add discipline to this list. As Christians, we bring glory to God by making disciples of neighbors and nations. It is interesting that in the Bible, God's people are never portrayed living this mission outside the community of faith. Instead, they understood the need to be together in the local church, and they were thus committed to it.

Our commitment to Christ and His church is marked by love. We want to love the Lord and help others to love and walk in obedience to Him. How do we do that? The answer is largely through discipline...church discipline. A disciple is disciplined. You see, God does not regard love and discipline as being at odds but teaches that love motivates discipline. Those verses in Proverbs make this point. If that is not enough proof, then consider Jesus. His love involves discipline. It begins with an act of mercy (John 15:13), and then it calls the recipients of mercy to the freedom of obedience (John 14:15).

As a disciplined people, we demonstrate our love and honor for God by obeying His commands. It is also imperative that we be a disciplined because the world (our community, your neighbors) needs to see a stark difference in God's people. We remember our mission. The world does not need a Christianized shadow of itself. It needs something full of light and flavor. It needs to see and experience something distinct.

¹³“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. ¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. – Matthew 5:13-16

Salt is useful because it is distinct and flavorful. Light is attractive to those standing in the dark because it is not the dark. The corporate endorsement of our faith through membership and our attendance in the church places us in a position to grow as a disciple through discipline. This is a good and healthy thing because it helps ensure our good gospel witness before God and others. God is concerned about how we live before Him and others.

As we talk about discipline this morning, we are talking about church discipline. I think we can all agree that discipline is beneficial. We have experienced it from our teachers, coaches, employers, and parents. We,

however, do not enjoy receiving it, which means we doubly do not enjoy administering it. For this reason, we rarely see it in the local church. Despite the difficulty and hesitancy that comes with discipline, it is one part of the discipleship process. Again, biblically speaking, a disciple is one who is disciplined.

Read Matthew 18:15-17.

Jesus presents a progression for how discipline in the church is to be carried out. When sin in a brother or sister is seen, then another brother or sister has the responsibility to confront that sin one-on-one, calling for repentance and faith. If there is no repentance, then he or she confronts a second time with the help of one or two other members. If there is still a refusal to repent, then the issue should be brought before the church, and the sinning brother or sister put out of the church if there is no repentance.

This progression for discipline is the pattern the church should use. Unfortunately, churches can fail to follow God's pattern, and when they do it hurts everyone involved. Such was the case for the church in Corinth.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-2, 9-13.

Paul had instructed this undisciplined church in his first letter how to recognize and deal with sin in the church. They had failed to hear and heed his directions. Rather than rebuking sin, this local church applauded it. They seemed to have been proud of their loving tolerance, so Paul scolded their open-mindedness and called for mourning over their sin. For this reason, he commanded the church to remove the man who was sexually involved with his father's wife.

The discipline we see in these two passages reveal the part we play as members in the local church to correct sin and point the disciple toward the better path. To be disciplined is to be disciplined. There are two types of discipline:

1. Proactive

This type of discipline is positive. We might also call this formative discipline. It comes through instruction. It is like the stake that helps the tree grow straight. It is like braces on teeth and an extra set of wheels on the bicycle. As a disciple we are disciplined in this way by:

- Reading the Bible
- Studying the Bible
- Praying the Bible
- Obeying the Bible
- Sharing the Bible
- Discussing the Bible

This proactive discipline operates at both the individual and relational levels of life. Every truth that you have heard someone talk about is part of formative discipline, which is proactive in nature.

2. Reactive

This type of discipline seeks to correct sin in a disciple through negative reinforcement. We might call it corrective discipline. It is confronting sin by pointing it out in the believer. Of course, the typical and first reaction people have to corrective discipline is an objection based on the premise of Matthew 7:1, *"Judge not, that you be not judged."* It is interesting that in the same gospel, Jesus also instructs the church to rebuke others for sin, even rebuking them publicly if needed (Matt 18:15-17). Whatever Jesus meant by not judging in chapter 7, He did not mean to rule out the kind of judging He mandated in chapter 18. What is the difference? In chapter 7, Jesus' warning is against hypocritical behavior, the type of behavior the Pharisees demonstrated. They saw everyone else's sin, but they refused to

acknowledge their own (Luke 18:10-14). In chapter 18, Jesus gives instruction on how to rebuke a brother living in sin for the purpose of winning him back to the faith.

In Matthew 18, it appears that Jesus had two main concerns. First, He was concerned that the sinner repents of his sin. Second, He was concerned that the number of people involved remain as small as necessary for producing repentance. The correction He described begins on the personal level. A brother goes to a brother to correct sin. When that brother in sin refuses to acknowledge and repent, two brothers go to confront the unrepentant brother. Eventually, if he continues to refuse repentance, the church gets involved, and if necessary, removes or excommunicates him.

When a church excommunicates a member, it is removing that person from membership and the Lord's Table. The local Protestant church is not saying what Roman Catholicism is saying, that the person is removed from membership and salvation. Excommunication is not a removal of person's relationship with Christ. We do not have Holy Spirit eyes to see a person's soul. Instead, the church is declaring that due to the ongoing sin and refusal to repent, the individual gives no evidence of conversion. Therefore, the church can no longer affirm the person as a believer and must now treat him or her as an unbeliever.

The sinful person is encouraged to attend and participate in services and meetings, but he or she is not afforded the rights and privileges of membership and the Lord's Table. The goal is to help the person feel the weight of sin and be drawn back to Christ.

Church discipline as outlined in Matthew 18 is often a long and drawn-out process. The instruction given by Paul to the church in Corinth is different. There he told the church to immediately dismiss the man among them engaged in sin. I believe what we see in both passages are two types of people: those who repent and those who do not. Paul's rebuke of the Corinthians gives the purpose in reactive discipline. We see that discipline:

- Exposes sin.
Like a cancer, sin loves to hide. Disciplines exposes it so that it might be cut out.
- Warns of judgment.
Discipline stages a small play that pictures the great judgement to come (1 Cor 5:5).
- Aims to save.
Discipline is arm-waving warning of danger ahead and calling for corrective action to be taken.
- Protects others.
Just as cancer spreads from one cell to another, so sin quickly spreads from one person to another (1 Cor 5:6).
- Preserves the gospel witness.
Discipline serves non-Christians because it keeps churches distinct and attractive (1 Cor 5:1).

Churches should practice reactive discipline. This means that members need to learn the skill of how to confront sin privately and tenderly. We dare not bring out the hammer for any and every sin. Instead, we want to begin with loving questions to gain a better understanding of what we think we see. This kind of questioning will require a relational culture in which informal correction is invited and received out of love.

Formal church discipline from the congregation should be reserved for sins of such significance that the church no longer feels able to affirm a person's profession of faith. The person's life does not match his confession, and he is not representing Jesus rightly. The decision to move toward excommunication is always about examining the dynamic between the sin and a person's overall posture of repentance. It is not a slide-rule that we need. It is a sin-versus-repentance balance. In other words, it was not the

scandalous nature of the sin in 1 Corinthians 5 that moved Paul to call for immediate excommunication, it was the man's refusal to repent and the church's affirmation of the sin.

When should a church publicly discipline a member?

3 Factors for Public Discipline

- 1) Outward
The sin must have an outward manifestation. It must be something that can be seen with the eyes or heard with the ears.
- 2) Significant
The sin must be of the kind that leaves the church wondering whether or not they can really affirm that the person is a believer.
- 3) Unrepentant
There must be a refusal to repent of sin even after multiple confrontations and appeals from members.

The church is not to engage in reactive discipline to get back at a person. It is not penal in nature. Rather, it is redemptive and exercised with humility and love.

2 Factors in Restoration

- 1) Signs of Genuine Repentance
- 2) Full and Free
Once there is repentance and the church has decided to restore the repenting individual to its fellowship, then there should be no discussion of a probational period or second-class membership. Instead, there should be full forgiveness, an affirmation of love, and a celebration because a brother or sister has returned (Luke 15:24).

Conclusion: Oh, the joy of the delivery room! There is absolutely nothing like holding your baby for the first time and looking into those beautiful eyes. The love you instantly feel is overwhelmingly. You will move heaven and earth to care, support, and protect that little one. Then comes the day when that precious child naturally begins to test the boundaries of your care and protection. In that moment, love leads you to discipline in a formal manner. Failing to do so not only hurts the child by teaching that the wrong action is okay. It also reveals that you as a parent do not love the child.

As God's people, our Heavenly Father lovingly disciplines us. Proactively this comes through our interaction with His Word. Reactively it comes through our engagement with His church. Are we open and receptive to this grace of formal, corrective discipline? Are we willing to invite others' questions of our Christian walk, and are we willing to ask questions of others' walk? Part of our membership and regular attendance in the church is to cultivate this culture so that we might be a disciple who is trained by discipline.