

The Church: Maintaining Her Purity and Mission

Matthew 18:15–20

Please find **Matthew 18** in your bible. This morning is the third sermon in a 3-part mini-series focusing on the church. We'll be in several passages as we consider the purity of the church. We first considered the mission of the church: to proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light; then how his mission is accomplished: through the generous giving of his people to fund his King's mission through what he gives each one. Now today, the purity of the church in doctrine, holiness, and unity.

Before we read, consider the importance of maintaining purity in your bloodstream. I assume no one wants an impure bloodstream. And if you have impurity, you're not likely to have it long. The beautiful immune system that God gave us will either eliminate the impurity, whether bacteria, or a virus, or a parasite, or the impurity will eliminate you. You may remember in 8th grade biology learning the five primary types of white blood cells that form the core of the human immune system. Neutrophils are the biggest percentage of white cells, attacking and killing bacteria. You scrape your knee on the sidewalk or are somehow exposed to bacteria that likes to grow in warm, nutrient-filled blood and neutrophils are designed by God to first be biochemically alerted to bacteria, then send out biochemical signals that a breach has occurred and call for more neutrophils to kill the bacteria by using their proteins and enzymes. It's amazing. Then you have lymphocytes that attack viruses. Eosinophils attack after parasites, like worms, and play a role in allergy response. So do basophils also engage in allergic responses. Monocytes sweep through and clean up dead cells and get them out. They can also aid in tissue repair as you heal from bruises or injuries. I don't know how anyone can study the immune system and say anything other than, "My God, how great thou art!"

God established an immune system for his Body, the Church, and it is just as beautifully designed to clean out parasites who seek to harm the Church, or the infective bacteria of false teaching and wrong doctrine, or the debilitating virus of disunity. He gives this process to keep the Church pure and spiritually thriving to proclaim his excellencies. The process is called church discipline.

Matthew 18:12–22 —¹² What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine

2

that never went astray. ¹⁴ So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

¹⁵ “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ 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 collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

²¹ Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

PRAY

When we think about church discipline, **Matthew 18:15–20** is often top of mind. We read **v 12** and went through **v 22** in order to see the flow of what Jesus is getting at in this passage. At the front end, we have Jesus pursuing the one sheep that has run away from the shepherd and the 99 others. He chases the one down, bringing him home. In **vv 21–22** he deals hurt and fractures in the sheepfold that caused disunity and hurt. He says the sheep are to forgive each other as much as the Shepherd has forgiven them. And wedged between those is the **go-to** passage for the three big steps of church discipline. When we read the flow in context we can reasonably conclude that Church discipline is **search and rescue**. The shepherd doesn't treat rebellious sheep as they deserve. The shepherd knows the sheep's dust-made frame and redeems his life from the pit he ran into. Discipline aims to direct erring sheep away from sin, error, and what brings destruction and harm. Reconciliation, restoration, unity, and safety with the rest of the fold is God's goal for his people, and there is much rejoicing when that happens. Paul captures this in Galatians 6:1 where he says, Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.

When is Church Discipline Necessary

There is a sense in which Church discipline is necessary all the time. You've already recognized that the word discipline and discipleship share the same root word. Church discipline or discipleship first

3

means having a regenerate membership — seeing that those who present themselves for membership give credible evidence of regeneration. Discipline is at work in every Bible study, every worship service, every sermon, every loving encounter with each other, as we go deeper in truth to fight error, and stir up one another to love and good works.

Moving from discipleship to specific discipline, ***Church discipline is necessary when doctrinal purity is threatened***. There is one Gospel once for all delivered to the Saints. That Gospel is salvation is in Christ alone, by grace through his atoning work alone, received by faith alone, to the glory of God alone, on the authority of his Word, his truth, alone. It is to be defended at all costs. In **Titus 1:9–11**, Elders must **hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.**¹⁰ **For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party.** ¹¹ **They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach.**

Romans 16:17 — **watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.** Note that deviant doctrine can cause divisions and create obstacles.

2 Timothy 2:24–26 says the Lord's servant must correct his opponents with gentleness [that] God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth...

2 John 9–11 instructs that we are neither to receive nor greet anyone who brings false teaching, else we share in their wicked ways.

Adding all those imperatives together, the discipline to be exercised to maintain doctrinal purity includes: hold firm to the Word, give instruction in sound doctrine (those are components of discipleship), rebuke those who contradict it, silence them, watch out for them, avoid them, correct them, and neither receive nor greet them.

We have a high-level example early in the life of the church. In **Galatians 2**, Paul records his confrontation of Peter in Antioch because Peter was wavering about circumcision and in danger of returning to legalism. Paul wrote, **I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned**. That rebuke of Peter, the most prominent apostle, was both direct and public, and published in God's unchanging word forever. Further, we know who Hymenaeus and Philetus are, recorded in 2 Timothy 2, because they swerved from doctrinal truth concerning the resurrection, and were called out for it.

4

In some cases doctrinal error can also be seen in behavior and actions, not just teaching. In the **3rd John, v 9**, the very old apostle writes, “I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority.” Diotrephes may not have a classroom, but by his actions he is defying the doctrinal authority of the Apostle John. So as Paul called out Peter in a public way, John calls out Diotrephes in a very public way — and with quite a bit of clarity about the error: Diotrephes loves to put himself first. Rather than denying himself, he pushes himself to the front. That is doctrinal error, and it is rebuked. Ouch.

Next, Church discipline is necessary to maintain holy living.

He who called us is holy, we also are to be holy in all our conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” (1 Peter 1:15–16) Not one of us on our best day is an accurate representation of our holy Lord. But we have this sure hope that the Spirit of God is working in us to conform us to the image of the son of God. He is working to produce his fruit in our lives. The whole of the New Testament describes how we have been delivered from the domain of darkness, brought out of the darkness of sin into his marvelous light, raised with Christ to walk in newness of life, given the Holy Spirit to walk in resurrection power. Transformed lives that love God bear witness that Christ saves sinners not only from the penalty of sin, but the power of sin.

Last semester in small groups as we worked through 1 Corinthians 5, we saw the account of a Corinthian church member who was sleeping with his stepmother and nothing was being done about it. Paul first rebuked the Church for allowing wickedness to go on in its midst, and then gave instruction that he was to be put out of the church for his wickedness, which was worse than even what the world did. This week we look at participation in the Lord’s Table, or withdrawing participation as a loving act of safety for those who are not walking in holiness and obedience.

Further we have these call outs for those who gave themselves to their sin.

- In **Acts 5**, Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit and the Church. God struck them down.
- In **2 Timothy 4**, Demas, who had been Paul’s assistant, deserted God’s work because he loved the world. Rather than quietly vanishing, Paul marked him as having abandoned the faith, thus putting a clean end to any influence he may have on others.

1 Timothy 5:20 says, those who persist in sin are to be rebuked in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. When the life of a Christian signals that they look more like the world than

5

Christ, when a Christian is walking away from Christ rather than toward him, Church discipline is to be employed for the correction of that soul, and as an example to others who may be tempted to sin. Jesus warns, in Matthew 7, that there will be many on the Great Day who were active with religious activity, but never **knew** Christ — that is, they had some head knowledge of Christ, but their hearts were never made new or transformed. On that day, he will tell those people to depart. Church discipline now, in this life, helps expose and diagnose the heart of those who may be hanging out with the people of God, as the man in Corinth, but have never been changed fundamentally by him. Church discipline in this case is absolutely essential as a warning to the soul.

Church Discipline is necessary to maintain the unity of the Spirit.

As the spirit is working to conform us to the image of Christ, Ephesians 4:1–3 tells us the Spirit is also working to create a unity in the bond of peace in the church. In Jesus's high Priestly prayer in **John 17**, he says that one of the ways the world will believe that the Father sent him is through the unity, the oneness of his body. God takes the unity of the church seriously. Thus:

- **Romans 16:17–18 — I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.**
- **Titus 3:10 — As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him.**

When we lose sight of our main mission to proclaim the Lord's excellences, division can creep in quickly. The virus of disunity was infecting the Corinthian Church. Paul deployed the immune system of church discipline to deal with debilitating division. **1 Corinthians 1:10** — I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. Euodia and Syntyche were members of a very sweet and healthy church in Philippi, but they could not get along and it was in danger of dividing the church. Paul called them out and even urged other people to come alongside and help them figure out how to get along. Paul also takes divisiveness very seriously, and as we saw in **Titus 3**, he doesn't tolerate it very long: 3 strikes and you're out. That's because disunity compromises what Jesus intends in the church, is sinful on the part of the one stirring up division, goes against the Holy Spirit who is working to produce unity in the church, but is also discouraging and dispiriting to the body in general, thus requiring quick correction.

6

Returning to Matthew 18 where we began, there are sinful offenses that are to be dealt with personally — that process being initiated by the one who was sinned against. “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.” It is not just the elders who have a responsibility in discipline, but all of us. We are to have open hearts to each other so that when we sin against each other, we can correct it. If we so love each other and are indeed open to each other, it is conceivable that we never move past the first step of Matthew 18. Yet because the Lord knows our prideful weaknesses, we have the prescribed escalation.

How can I, a sinner, undertake to rebuke someone in sin? I would respond to that in two ways.

First, I am not the standard. And neither are you. God and his word are the standard. It is absolutely true that we are all sinners. But we do not measure ourselves by ourselves. As those who have come to an awareness of our sin and our need for a Savior, we see the danger of sin in our own hearts and souls. Seeing that danger, and knowing the fear of the Lord that those who refuse to come to him will perish, we become repentance. We don't stay in that sin; we are seeking to walk on the highway of holiness. And we look to him who loves us and pursues us, and demonstrates his love for us in this: while we were still sinners Christ died for the ungodly.

And that's the second response I would make: There is a difference between giving oneself to sin, not doing battle against sin— but justifying it, embracing it. There is a difference between that and working to slay what we know will destroy us. Church discipline is for the Christian who will not submit to the Scripture, will not acknowledge sin as what it is, but steadfastly refuse the correction of God's word and his bride, the Church. It is a wake up for those who claim Christ. It clarifies that you're choosing the way of death, and that's not compatible with walking in the ways of Christ.

Restoration and Reconciliation

The goal of discipline is experiencing the Gospel. The Gospel is this: I am a sinner and fall short of God's glory. When I fall short, when I walk away from God's good commands, when I fail, and when I fall, I get up and start again in faith because I have a Savior. Discipline is the prod that pushes me toward life and blessing in Christ; it's the lasso around my horns that pulls me out of the ditch and onto the highway of holiness.

Hebrews 12 reminds us one of the ways God expresses his fatherly love toward us is through discipline — including discipline by the Church. He is treating us as sons. For what son is there whom

7

his father does not discipline? God disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Let that wash over you. Let it shape how we understand discipline: God is producing in us the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Let us then keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and his mission, and embrace repentance when we depart from it.

PRAY