

CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Introduction:

A few weeks ago, I preached a lesson on discipline. Tonight we want to revisit that issue in a little more detail. Let me first say, that I do not claim to have all the answers to all the questions about the business of discipline in the church. And ultimately we all have to go to the Bible ourselves and personally study any subject with which we want to be familiar and upon which we desire to come to a knowledge of the truth. As I have said before, this is not a easy subject to have to deal with, and quick frankly it is not a subject that I enjoy preaching on. I'd much rather preach on something else. With that said, though, let's endeavor to dig a little deeper on this subject of discipline in the church of our Lord.

Lesson:

I. What Is Discipline?

A. The American Heritage Dictionary defines discipline as follows: 1. *“Training expected to produce a specific character or pattern of behavior, especially training that produces moral or mental improvement.”* 2. *“Punishment intended to correct or train.”* Webster's Collegiate Dictionary says that discipline has to do with the following: *“1. Punishment. 2. Instruction. 3. Training that molds, or perfects the mental faculties or moral character.”* These basic definitions of discipline tells us that there is a specific purpose for discipline. That purpose is to instruct or train. So the word discipline is related to and comes from the same family of words as does the word *disciple*. A disciple is one who is instructed or trained by another. One who needs discipline is someone who needs some help in following instruction or training. And this is online with the biblically stated purpose for disciplinary action (**1 Tim. 1:19, 20**). But also, it must be pointed out, that discipline involves some kind of punishment. What that means is that the process is not a pleasant one. It is meant to cause some discomfort. If there is no element of displeasure, the discipline, in most cases at least, is not going to work. Again, the Bible points this out in regard to discipline (**2 Thess. 3:14**).

Now let me at the point, before we look at the specifics in the action of church discipline, point out the reason for disciplinary action. It is first to rescue the one who is now lost (**1 Cor. 5:5**). But listen to me: that is not the only reason for it. Church discipline is also to protect the church for corruption (**1 Cor. 5:6**). So then, even if you were to come to believe that discipline would not cause a person to repent in a certain situation, your love for the church should compel you to take the action God demand of you.

B. Now, what is the disciplinary action taken by the church when one refuses to follow the instruction of the Lord? We know what the secular definition of discipline is. In the world discipline might consist of a worker being sent home without pay, or children getting spanked, sent to his room, or having some privilege taken away. But one thing is clear - discipline involves action being taken. So what specific action is to be taken when we talk about discipline in the church? First, before we look at some specific passages, let us quickly point out

that which should be obvious to all, i.e., the action taken is not physical (**2 Cor. 10:1-11**). Disciplinary action taken by the church is first verbal and then, if that does not work, it involves a cutting off of association.

1. **1Thes 5:14** - A person is not to be excommunicated every time he sins. Disciplinary action is taken against those who refuse to stop sinning. So there must first be a warning of some sort (**Matt. 18:15-18**).
2. **1 Cor. 5:11-13** - The disciplinary action taken by the church is described in three ways in this passage.
 - a. **“Not to keep company.”** Strong says that the Greek word translated *“to keep company”* means the following: *“to mix up together, i.e. associate with.”*
 - b. **“No not to eat.”** This would obviously point to having no social contact with the individual.
 - c. **“Put away from among yourselves.”** Thayer says that the word translated *“put away”* means *“to lift up or to take away out of a place; to remove.”* Now, what is implied by this last action that must be taken is that at times the guilty party is going to want to continue to sin, but still maintain an association or a social relationship with some members of the church. Paul says to the church, “do not do it!” Do not associate with the one who is being punished.
3. **2 Thess. 3:6, 14** - Again in this passage three things are said about the action taken in disciplinary action:
 - a. **“Withdraw yourselves.”** Strong says that the Greek word for *“withdraw yourselves”* means, *“abstain from associating with,”* and Thayer says it means, *“to remove oneself, to abstain from familiar intercourse with one.”*
 - b. **“Have no company with.”** Same word used in 1 Cor. 5:11.
 - c. **“Note that man.”** Strong say the word *note* means *“to distinguish, i.e. mark (for avoidance).”*
4. Other passages that teach the same (**Rom. 16:7; 1 Tim. 6:3-5; Tit. 3:10, 11**).

Whatever else is unclear and uncertain about this subject matter, the action that must be taken in regard to disciplining a brother or sister who lives in sin is clear. The guilty party, i.e., the brother or sister living in sin, must be cut-off from association with the rest of the body of Christ. Why? 1 Corinthians says *“that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”* 2 Thessalonians says *“that he may be ashamed,”* and 1 Timothy says, *“that others may also fear.”*

II. When Is A Commandment of God Modified?

Now, does there ever come a time when a commandment of God is modified? The answer is yes, but only one thing can ever modify a commandment of God. That one thing is another commandment. In certain cases one commandment can overrule or modify another commandment (*e.g. obeying the law of the land and obeying God*).

III. Different God-ordained Relationships in Life.

Now, the question tonight is whether or not there is a commandment given by God that might at times override the need to cut off association with one who has been disciplined by the church. The answer is yes and is seen in the different God-ordained relationships that we have in life. First, let's look at some relationships that we have in life.

- A. **The Church Relationship (1 Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 4:16; Gal. 6:1; 2 Thess. 3:14).**
- B. **Community Relationship (Gal. 6:10; 1 Pet. 2:12; Col. 4:3-5).**
- C. **Business Relationship (Eph. 4:28; Col. 3:22; 4:1,2; 2 Thess. 3:10; 1 Tim. 5:8)**
- D. **Civil Government Relationship (Rom. 13:1-8; 1 Pet. 2:13-17).**
- E. **Family Relationship (Eph. 6:1-4; Deut. 6:4-9; Col. 3:18-21; Matt. 19:9; Eph. 5:21-33; 1 Pet. 3:1-7; 1 Tim. 5:16).**

Now, something important must be pointed out here. Just because we sustain a relationship in one of these areas with a brother who has been withdrawn from, does not mean that you can automatically ignore the command not to associate with him or her. There must be a responsibility within that relationship that demands association. For example, say I'm in business with a brother who has been withdrawn from. Does that mean that I must end the business partnership in order not to associate with him? No. That business is my livelihood. It is how I provide for my family which is a God-given responsibility. But now, what I must do is make sure that my partner knows where I stand so far as our personal relationship goes. There will be no association outside the business relationship. The relationship that I do have with him in the business realm places no responsibility on me to associate with him outside that realm. Thus, there must be no association in any other area.

Now, let's look at a situation that is a little more touchy. The family relationship. Let's say my brother in flesh is withdrawn from. Am I allowed to associate with him because of my family relationship to him? Well, what has to be determined is if I have a responsibility within that relationship to do so. The clear answer to that question is no. If I do have responsibility towards him, what is it? Someone says, "*but he's family.*" Well, we are all family in Christ and in our spiritual family the responsibilities therein are more significant than even our physical family (**Matt. 12:47-50**).

Now, there are some family relationships that would override the commandment to stop associating with a withdrawn brother. For example, if I was withdrawn from, Janice would still be my wife. She would have to associate with me and she would still be obligated to fulfill all of her marital responsibilities. She could not divorce me on the

basis of the fact that I was not faithful to the Lord and have been withdrawn from by the church. Matt. 19:9 would forbid that action. Another example would be the child parent relationship. No matter what happens in the spiritual realm, children and parents sustain certain responsibilities one toward another. Those responsibilities, however, must be pin-pointed. Is there a time, when a parent must stop associating with a brother or sister who has been withdrawn from, even if it is a son or a daughter? The answer is yes. When does that time come? When there is no longer a binding responsibility inherit in the relationship. Parents have responsibilities to provide and care for their adolescent children. Now, it is sometimes hard to determine when one stops being an adolescent, and in fact it differs from person to person and from culture to culture. The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia says the following about the period of time we call adolescence:

“time of life from onset of puberty to full adulthood, falling APPROXIMATELY between the ages of 12 and 21, and is characterized by physical changes and a movement toward PERSONAL INDEPENDENCE, which vary significantly from person to person and from one culture to another” (The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia).

Now, what one whose child has been disciplined by the church has to decide is whether or not that child has reached the place in his life when he is personally independent, that is, whether he is an adult that can and must care for himself. At that point the only responsibility that the parent has toward the child is to love him or her, and that does not demand an association. In fact, true love, that is, the biblical love of agape, always acts in the best interest of whoever is loved and in this case that would demand a cutting off of association. Thus, at that stage the parents are obligated by God to observe the rules of discipline as set forth in the passages that we looked at earlier, i.e., to refrain from association. The truth is, to do otherwise is to demonstrate a lack of love for his or her soul, or at the very least, a misguided love that is not in the child's best interest. Furthermore, when a Christian refuses to following God's disciplinary law for brothers and sisters in Christ, even if there is a family relationship involved, that constitutes sin. Think of the irony in that. Your brother, sister, cousin, parent, child, close friend or whatever the relationship is, becomes unfaithful and is disciplined by the church. The only chance he or she has of escaping a devil's hell, is repentance, and the best chance of that may well be the complete cutting off of association by the ones to which he or she feels closest. But instead of doing what God says, a person refuses, out of a misguided sense of love, to withdraw fellowship and ends up in the same spiritual condition of the one who is now in the grasp of the devil.

Conclusion:

This is not, as we said in the beginning, an easy matter with which to deal. It involves tough and sorrowful decision sometimes. But remember, the object is to help the one who is living in sin to come back to faithful service unto the Lord. It is not to please man. It is not to make anyone happy. It is about saving souls. And when it comes down to that, God knows best and we must follow His plan.