

Kingdom Discipline And Restoration

Matthew 18:15-17

Introduction

Church discipline is a subject most uncomfortable in our culture and in our church. We understand that there must be order in society and in the home but we rarely demand the same order in the Church. Our chapter began with lessons on greatness but now Jesus gives instructions about injury and forgiveness and restoration. Jesus speaks of our fellowship with one another. We quickly learn that Christians aren't perfect. If each person always and everywhere loved God and obeyed Christ there would be no need for these instructions.

Because Christians fall into sin and offense Jesus reminds us how we as a Church family can remain happy and holy.

We Christians accept the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins and embrace Christ's rule in our lives. Jesus pronounced a curse on the world because of offenses (v.7). Jesus warns His disciples the greatest in the Kingdom are to exercise personal humility and that we radically deal with sin in our lives (see vv.8-9). **Jesus warned that we have no right to sin against each other.** And now Jesus gives us the answer of what to do—if we do sin against each other. God knows sin separates. God is in the business of exposing sin, forgiving sin and restoring relationships. **The Lord Jesus is not in the breakup business.** We are. "In a perfect world, it would never end like this, there'd be something we could do. In a perfect world, lovers wake up with a kiss, and their wishes all come true. But here we are". We live in an imperfect world populated with imperfect people, who make imperfect decisions. But Jesus is in the business of restoring relationships, healing friendships, exercising forgiveness and restoration to broken people. Matthew 18 has been called a formula for Church Discipline—yet it is so much more. These instructions given by Jesus are given to us so that we can deal with our problems and our failures and our sin and be reconciled in our relationships one to another. **Matthew 18 is not an excuse to end relationships but an opportunity to deal with one another in righteousness and peace according to God's Word.** We have a great deal of freedom in Christ. But we do not have the freedom to sin against one another. Discipline begins when sin takes place in relationship. Jesus is in effect requiring Christians to believe God's Word, and God's people to obey God's Word. Matthew 18 is a model of restoration for broken friendships and relationships in the context of Church fellowship. But some people insist on disagreement and injury and sin and will go to absurd lengths to ruin relationships.

Matthew 18 is not a convenient clause to weed out troublemakers in the Church. These are Christ's instructions for peace and harmony and order in the Church. These principles aren't optional. They are a part of the King's Constitution and serve as a handbook for healthy churches and healthy relationships.

Step One: Examine Yourself And Restoration (Gal.5:23)

"...gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law."

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Why begin here? In dealing with sin we should always begin with self-examination. Christian character is formed by God's Holy Spirit in the Believer's heart. The fruit of the Spirit begins with love and ends with gentleness and self-control. Walking in the Spirit is not some emotional experience detached from everyday life. Walking in the Spirit is the daily experience of the Believer who loves and reads God's Word, prays and obeys what the Bible says.

Can we overlook faults and failures in the lives of our loved ones? I think the answer is yes. When does confrontation become necessary?

When sin has broken our fellowship with one another. We are encouraged that in Romans 5:10 Paul says; "For when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of His Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!"

Step Two: Person To Person And Restoration (v.15a)

Matthew 18:15–17 (NKJV) 15 "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.

The more people you involve the more complicated the discipline! Jesus does not say 'tell me' or 'tell the Pastor' or 'tell his mother'. Go alone. Go motivated by love and in deep humility. Jesus says, "go and tell him his fault between you and him alone." We often do the exact opposite—we turn away in hatred or resentment—or seek revenge—or engage in gossip.

The injury begins with a perceived sin. Many people read this verse and think "I hate conflict". Jesus apparently isn't interested in excuses, or rationalizations or reasons to allow the sin to remain unchallenged or unresolved. Jesus says "go and tell him his fault—between you and him alone. **People will have conflict. The real test is how we handle the conflict.**

Preferences and differences do not always constitute sin. Sometimes misunderstandings degenerate into massive conflict, personal attacks, sinful words and sinful deeds. When people injure each other in the world they get an attorney or sue or go on some reality TV show.

In Matthew 5:23-24 Jesus said, "Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, "leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." In other words Jesus says, interrupt worship if that's what it takes—but go and be reconciled to your brother. If you have something against someone go to them. If they have something against you—they should go to you. To Jesus it does not matter whether offended or offender—go. When someone says, "Why should I be the one who makes this right—the answer is because broken relationships are harmful to our church and we can't leave something as important and powerful as reconciliation to chance.

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In Luke 17:3 Jesus says “Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.” The word ‘rebuke’ means to cautiously confront with a view that you might be wrong. There is a right way and a wrong way to confront. Ray Kraybill in “Repairing the Breach” has a list of eight ways to turn a simple disagreement into a full fledged feud—how NOT to respond to conflict:

1. Be sure to develop and maintain a healthy fear of conflict, letting your own feelings build up so you are in an explosive frame of mind.
2. If you must state your concerns, be as vague and general as possible. Then the other person cannot do anything practical to change the situation.
3. Assume you know the facts and that you are totally right. Then use a clinching out of context Bible verse. Speak prophetically for truth and justice; do most of the talking.
4. With a touch of defiance, announce your willingness to talk to anyone who wishes to discuss the problem with you. But do not take steps to initiate such conversation.
5. Latch tenaciously onto whatever evidence you can find that shows the other person is merely jealous of you.
6. Judge the motivation of the other party on any previous experience that showed failure or unkindness. Keep track of any and all angry words.
7. If the discussion should alas, become serious, view the issue as a win/lose struggle. Avoid possible solutions and go for total victory and unconditional surrender. Don’t get too many options on the table.
8. Pass the buck! If you are about to be cornered into a solution, indicate you are without power to settle: you need your partner, spouse, bank whatever (Quoted from Tell It To the Church pp. 31-32).

Jesus isn’t asking a person to rely on subjective feelings but objective facts. The confrontation is more like a court of law than a psychological encounter group. The word “fault” here in verse 15 means “convict”—like the presence of evidence in a court of law in order to obtain conviction. This does not mean bring someone ‘feelings’ of sorrow or guilt but rather objective wrong doing.

If you have no facts to back up your perception of wrong doing perhaps you should not make the accusation. Many Christians become hurt, angry, upset or insufficient grounds (he’s touching me, he looked at me funny). Unless you kids stop I am going to have to reevaluate my position on child abuse.

We do not have the right to sin against each other. We do not have the right to make false accusations. Clearly we have to be careful of unloving acts and unloving attitudes. Love believes all things and hopes and endures all things. We are to view our brothers and sisters actions not in the worst possible light but in the best possible light.

What happens if he hears you? You have gained your brother. The operative word is “if he hears you”. The person recognizes the misunderstanding or the sin. The person loves you—and you love them. You are looking for reasons to stay together—not stay apart. The sin is recognized,

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confessed, repented. When the offense is between two people, and they have recognized the offense and are reconciled they need go no further. You have won your brother means reconciliation is accomplished. In the Bible the word for reconciliation is *diallasso*—*which means to exchange enmity for friendship*.

Apologies are important and necessary—but they can never serve as a substitute for biblical repentance. There is a difference between being sorry—and godly sorrow over sin. When a person says, “I forgive you” they are making a promise to never raise the matter again. A promise can be made absent the presence of feelings. Forgiveness is a choice we make not a feeling felt. If a person says “I repent” that can be sufficient. Since reconciliation is restoring friendship and relationship both parties must work together. Forgiveness clears the way for friendship. Efforts must be made to restore and build a better relationship.

Step Three: Worthwhile Witnesses And Restoration (v.16)

16But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’

How many times must you approach the person? The Bible doesn’t say. The operative phrase is “. . .if he will not hear.” The implication is to try and make him hear. Let anger cool. Give it time. What moves the process forward? When the person refuses to be reconciled. At each stage, Jesus notes—“and if he refuses to listen”. This does not mean if you have approached the person once and they don’t listen—move on to the next step. You may want to vary your approach. Maybe include some meekness and humility. Look for signs the person may be weakening in their stubborn resolve to sin. Make sure that unwillingness to hear—**is not a failure to understand**. The real issue is the unwillingness of people in Christ—to recognize sin and its harm—and to recognize Christ’s deep desire for wholeness and wellness in the Body of Christ. If a person asks for further evidence, Bible verses, understanding of the facts, give it to him or her. Make sure the problem is not a failure to rightly divide the Word of Truth.

Bring witnesses (see Deut.19:15). This does not mean they witnessed the offense. If someone witnessed the sin—it is not private—it is public. If I see you hit your wife or hear you gossip or speak evil—If I watch you injure someone—I am a witness. Here the witnesses are lovers—of both parties who **desire to see them reunited. These are not strangers but counsellors looking for biblical solutions to life’s problems.** These are people who are supposed to participate in the restoration and reconciliation process. The witnesses confirm or attest to every word. In other words—are the accusations accurate? They are to witness to the words of accusation and the words of refusal on the part of the brother or sister to move towards confession, repentance and reconciliation. **In other words, these are not witnesses to the events of step two but mediators to the discussions of step three.**

Who should these people be? Jesus does not say. The implication is that any Christian can be called on to help. If the person is called on to counsel, offer help, serve as a witness to the

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discussions, it seems reasonable that maturity, knowledge, sensitivity, and commitment to Biblical principles of confession and forgiveness is present. If elders or deacons or the pastor is chosen—they are not operating as Church officials—but private Christian citizens in love with the idea of reconciling hurting—offended parties. To assure privacy, the name of the offending party should not be revealed until the person has agreed to act as a witness. Like jury duty, it is the duty of every citizen to serve, it is the duty of every Christian to act as a loving channels of reconciliation. This does not have to be complicated. You can make an appointment to see the person. A good witness should be careful not to allow the brother or sister to prejudice the case by filling the witness with all the details of the accusation. Beyond the bare facts you are better off not to hear the sordid details. Otherwise you run the risk of being a party to gossip. Even so the other person may think you are ganging up against him or her. Make several appointments if you have to. Go to them if you have to. Make every effort to win them. If the person refuses all overtures of love, hearing and reconciliation you make have to take the next step. We should be constantly looking for God honoring Biblical solutions to sin, to misunderstanding. We are looking to give grace and mercy to all concerned.

Step Four: Tell It To The Church And Restoration (v.17a)

17And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.

All the steps have been informal thus far. We now reach the court of last resort. There are times when the court of last resort is the court of first resort depending on the severity of the sin (like Paul's charge to the Corinthian Church over the man who was sexually involved with his own father's wife; 1 Corinthians 5:1-7). Jesus does not give us specific instructions on how to 'tell it to the church'. I think we must piece together principles from the rest of Scripture to determine how this is done. I don't think "telling it to the church" means interrupting the worship service or the message by getting up and saying; "so and so is a dirty rat". We have gone through the process of Matthew 18 and their is a refusal **on the part of the offending party** to acknowledge their sin, a refusal to heed the warnings and pleadings of other believers and now it is time to tell the church. How then do we tell the church? We know that all things must be done decently and in order. Clearly this might be like the events of Acts 15 when the church leaders and elders and believers meet to consider some matter. Often in the OT when God wanted to address the people of Israel he assembled the elders and the leaders. When elders tell the church we must be sure that only Christians know. Even here the implication is that the elders and the leaders plead with the person to be reconciled in relationship. Is the Bible trying to shame someone into compliance? Judge for yourself (2 Thessalonians 3:14); "And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed."

Step Five: Removal From The Covenant Community and Restoration (v.17b)

"...if he refuses to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector". The NT describes ways in which people are 'put out' of the church; "Remove them from your midst

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(1 Cor. 5:2). “Clean out the leaven” (1 Cor. 5:7). “Get him out of your midst (1 Cor.5:13). “Deliver this person to Satan” (1 Cor. 5:5). “I have handed them over to Satan” (1 Tim.1:20). “Treat them like a heathen and a tax collector”. A heathen is outside the church. A tax collector was a Jew who had been put out of fellowship in the synagogue for collaboration with the occupying enemies of Israel. We do not make a judgment about their actual salvation or spiritual condition before God. But we are to ‘treat’ them as if they are unbelievers. The church does not judge his or her heart but we must judge their words and their deeds. This judgment is a functional judgment. We treat this person like we would any other unsaved person. If a Christian wants to marry them—we refuse to participate. If they want to participate in the Lord’s Supper or Communion—we should forbid it. When we talk to them, we should evangelize them—with the gospel.

Conclusion

Why? We are to treat them like unbelievers. In the course of the ‘discipline’ the person has in effect said; “I don’t care about you. I don’t care about having sinned against you. I don’t care what you say. I don’t care what others have to say about my sinful behavior. I don’t care what the Church leaders say and I don’t care what the Bible—God’s Word has to say about my behavior. I don’t care what Jesus has to say about my sinful behavior. What can you say? Having rejected love for the brethren, having rejected the authority of the Church, having rejected the instructions of Jesus—this person has demonstrated that for all intents and purposes he or she is not a Christian. In effect the offender is in the Kingdom of Darkness and the church is in mourning over the loss of our comrade.

Is there any hope for the offender? Yes! As a Christian you pledged your love and loyalty to Jesus Christ. **We have no right to sin against God or each other. Christians in particular have no right to sin against loved ones.** *2 Corinthians 2:6-8; “This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man (7) so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. (8) Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him.”* **When the offender repents—they must be forgiven and restored. They must be assisted in the restoration process. They must be reinstated in love.** June Hunt writes; “Reconciliation is the act of settling or harmonizing differences, especially resolving differences between one another. While a relationship will not always be salvaged, the spirit of reconciliation always reflects the heart of God” (see *Reconciliation; Restoring Broken Relationships; p.11*).

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor.5:18).

How Are We To Handle Conflict?

- 1. Do not ignore conflict but confront it.**

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- 2. Don't exaggerate conflict. . .solve it with the least amount of publicity or public scrutiny.**
- 3. Don't abandon conflict. . .pursue it to a godly and biblical resolution.**
- 4. Don't always go it alone. . .taking two or three witnesses require that you also are open to reproof and correction.**
- 5. Don't recycle conflict; once it is resolved let it go and get back to your life.***

(Taken From Life Application Commentary; Matthew p.360).