



## Marks of a Healthy Church Mark Seven: Biblical Church Discipline (Part Two)

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Last Sunday we started our look at biblical accountability or church discipline by looking at what Scripture tells us. If you weren't here last week, I encourage you to read or listen to that sermon. It's on the website or I can get you copy. Today I want to continue by looking at the practical applications of what Scripture tells us. You'll remember from last week that the purpose of church discipline is to preserve the Church from the corrupting influence of sin and false doctrine, because if either or both of these are left unchecked they fester and grow and will eventually destroy a church from within. That was why the founders of Living Word left the Anglican Church—without discipline it had lost Christ altogether and no longer had any real witness to offer the world.

What's remarkable is that something like church discipline that is so clearly commanded in Scripture and that is so obviously needed has come to be almost completely ignored. I expect that for some of you, this is probably the first time you've ever heard it preached on—which itself points to the dire need in the wider church for expository preaching that systematically teaches the whole Word of God. And that points to what happened: the Church has not been as faithful to the Word as it once was and as it should still be.

Discipline dropped out of practice for a variety of reasons. If we look at the history of the Church over the last century-and-a-half, the drop in discipline corresponds directly to the church's growing interest in reforming society. St. Paul warned the Corinthians about this. The more the church focuses on the sin in the world, the less she worries about the sin in her own body. He told them in 1 Corinthians that the church needs to remember that the world is dead in sin and that the world's only hope is the Church and the purity of her witness. But other factors contributed too: Churches started putting their bottom line above accountability. We began to fear that discipline might lead to a loss of income for the church. And as modern culture strayed

further and further from the life Scripture tells us to live, the instances where discipline was needed grew and more and more people refused to submit. And like dominos the churches started falling. If one church stops exercising discipline, then those who refuse to submit to the discipline in their own church simply transfer their membership to the church that doesn't hold them accountable and as churches compete to hold onto their members, pretty soon everybody stops holding their members accountable.

And it's not just a matter of the whole church and her leaders holding members accountable for "big" sins or for major doctrinal errors. It's led to a church culture in which the system breaks down at every level. Remember, we're supposed to take care of business between ourselves and our brothers and sisters, first one-on-one. It's only when we've exhausted every effort to restore our brother or sister ourselves that the issue goes to the church—only in the extreme cases. But today it's common that petty offenses and personal differences result not in brothers and sisters going to each other to resolve their differences lovingly and in the way Christ commanded. Instead we simply ignore the offender, or worse, we gossip about the offense to others and creating divisions within the body of Christ. What does it communicate to the world when you and your brother or sister in Christ are at odds with each other? When instead of lovingly reconciling with the person who used to sit right next to you, you've parted ways and now sit on opposite sides of the church—or worse, one of you has moved on to another church to avoid the problem entirely. What does it communicate to the world about the love of Christ when Christian husbands and wives can't resolve their differences and have a divorce rate in the church that is the same, or according to some statistics, slightly higher than the rest of our society?

The Church used to judge how well she was doing based on the spiritual growth and discipleship of her members and how they were coming to conform to God's standard of holiness. Once we toss discipline out the window we start losing ground in those areas. It's no wonder that in the last century we've started judging how the Church is doing by numbers. If the church is big, it must be doing everything right and everybody starts copying what the big churches are doing because it's all about numbers.

But imagine this: The church is huge. It's still growing. People like it. The music is great. The people are welcoming. There are lots of programmes to meet every need.

People gladly sign on to give their support. And yet, the church, in trying to look like the world in order to win the world, has done a better job than it ever intended, and now we have a church that fails to display to the world the holy characteristics that the New Testament says it should be showing. Imagine a vigorous church being truly spiritually sick, with no immune system left to guard against wrong teaching or wrong living. Imagine Christians up to their eyeballs in recovery groups and sermons on brokenness and grace, being *comforted* in their sin but never *confronted*. Imagine those people, made in the image of God, being lost to sin because no one *corrects* them. Can you imagine a church like that? Frankly, it shouldn't be hard, because I've just described much of the Church in the West.

It was interesting that a couple of years ago, Bill Hybel's Willow Creek ministry published a book after doing a thorough study of where their understanding of ministry has gotten them after thirty years. Willow Creek was sort of the first mega-church and Hybel's has been one of the big proponents of what's called the Church Growth Movement and of being "seeker sensitive". In their book they noted with sadness that after thirty years, their approach to church and to evangelism hadn't really made many real disciples. Some baby Christians maybe—who've never grown. But in fact they realised that many of the people they had attracted were converts to the programmes offered by the church, instead of being converts to Jesus Christ. And yet this failed approach at "doing church" dominates mainstream evangelicalism today. And now that we've changed the standard, it seems like an impossible task to return to the biblical standard. We've instilled in our people a self-centred religion that cares only for what "I can get out of it" and that cares little for the church as a whole. As a result, if we do try to return to the biblical standard, more often than not people will simply run to the church down the street that isn't faithful to Scripture in this area.

Without accountability, the church will never be healthy, even if we're talking raw numbers. Just ask what those numbers mean and you start seeing the trouble. Alan Redpath has said about the membership of the average North American church that 5% don't exist, 10% can't be found, 25% don't attend, 50% show up on Sunday, 75% don't attend prayer meetings, 90% have no family worship, and 95% have never shared the Gospel with others. It's critical that the church return to God's standard when it comes to discipline.

Now there are some reasons *not* to practice church discipline. We should never practice it to be vindictive. St. Paul reminded the Romans, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’” (Romans 12:19). Corrective discipline is never to be done in a mean spirit, but only out of love for the offending brother or sister and the members of the church, and ultimately out of love for God himself. This may be one reason why discipline fell out of use. About a hundred years ago there was a disturbing trend amongst many evangelicals to exercise discipline vindictively and often simply over differences of opinion on minor issues with the pastor.

Discipline should never take place out of the mistaken notion that we have the final word from God on a person’s eternal fate. Corrective church discipline is never meant to be the final statement about a person’s salvation. We don’t know that. That kind of pronouncement is not our duty. It’s beyond our ability to determine.

We are to practice church discipline because, with humility and love, we want to see good come.

We looked earlier at Jesus’ words in Matthew 7:1: “Judge not lest ye be judged.” He went on to say, “For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you” (Matthew 7:2). When we talk about church discipline today, this verse comes to mind for a lot of people. But Jesus isn’t forbidding being rightly critical. What he’s forbidding is doing that which isn’t in our authority to do. Personal revenge is wrong, but final justice is right. It’s wrong to ask people to measure up to your whims and wishes, but it’s completely right for God to require his creatures to reflect his holy character. We don’t in ourselves have the right or ability to condemn finally, but one day God will ask his followers to pronounce his judgements on his creation.

What has happened in much of the Church is that we’ve used Matthew 7:1 as a shield for sin and we’ve prevented the kind of congregational life that we see in the churches of the New Testament and down through history right up to a hundred years ago.

Discipline isn’t about a holier-than-thou judgemental attitude. That kind of attitude is evidence of a heart that’s ignorant of its debt

to God’s grace and mercy. But likewise, people who aren’t concerned with sin in their own lives or in the lives of those they love are not showing the kind of holy love that Jesus had and that he said would mark his disciples.

We don’t exclude someone from fellowship because we know their final state will be eternal separation from God. No, we exclude someone out of a concern that they are living in a way that displeases God. We do not discipline because we want to get back at someone. We discipline in humility and out of love for God and for the person disciplined.

I know it goes against our grain today, but we *should want* to see discipline practiced this way. Let me give you five reasons why:

First, *we discipline for the good of the person disciplined.* The man in Corinth who was sleeping with his step-mother was lost in his sin, thinking that God approved of his affair. The people in the churches of Galatia thought it was fine that they were trusting in their own works instead of in Christ alone. Alexander and Hymenaeus thought it was all right for them to blaspheme God. But none of these people were in good standing with God. Out of love for people like this, we should want to see church discipline practiced. We don’t want our church to encourage hypocrites who are hardened, confirmed, and lulled in their sins. We don’t want to live that kind of life individually, or as a church.

Second, *we need to practice discipline for the good of other Christians, as they see the danger of sin.* St. Paul told St. Timothy that if a leader sins he should be rebuked publicly. That doesn’t mean that anytime I, as the pastor, do anything wrong, you guys should stand up in the service and say, “Hey, Bill, that was wrong.” It means that when there’s a serious sin—especially one that isn’t repented of—it needs to be brought up in public so that others can take warning by seeing the serious nature of sin. Discipline is a teaching a tool for the rest of the body. When I was growing up, I was very observant every time my older brother got into trouble; I learned from the discipline that was dished out to him. Church discipline works much the same way—it serves as a warning to the whole church.

Third, *we need to practice church discipline for the health of the church as a whole.* St. Paul pleaded with the Corinthians that they shouldn’t have boasted about having such toleration for sin in the church. He asked

rhetorically, “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” Yeast represents the unclean and spreading nature of sin. So Paul says:

**Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.** (1 Corinthians 5:7-8)

Remember that for the Passover meal the lamb was slaughtered and unleavened bread was eaten. Paul tells the Corinthians that the lamb (Christ) had been slaughtered, and that they (the Corinthian church) were to be the unleavened bread. They were to have no leaven of sin in them. They, as a whole church, were to be an acceptable sacrifice.

Now that doesn’t mean that discipline is to be the focal point of the church. Discipline is no more the focal point of the church than medicine is the focal point of life. There may be some times when you are because of necessity consumed with discipline, but most of the time it shouldn’t be more than something that allows you to get on with your main task. It’s not the task itself.

Fourth, *discipline is important for the corporate witness of the church.* Brothers and sisters, our being disciplined is a powerful tool in evangelism. I was reading Greg Wills’ history of the Southern Baptists and he points out that in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the average Baptist church excommunicated 2% of her membership every year. Today we’d say, “You can’t do that! Nobody would want to come!” And yet during that same time the evangelistic efforts of those churches made them the fastest growing denomination in the US, growing at *twice* the population growth. Friends, people notice when our lives are different and especially so when there’s a whole community of people whose lives are different—not people whose lives are perfect, but whose lives are marked by genuinely trying to love God and to love each other. When churches are seen as conforming to the world, it undermines all our evangelistic efforts. We become so like the unbelievers that they have no questions they want to ask us. Instead, we need to be living in such a way that it makes those around us constructively curious!

But finally, *the most important reason to practice church discipline is for the glory of God*, as we reflect his holiness. Friends,

that's why we're alive! God made humanity to bear his image and to carry his character to his creation. It's no surprise that throughout the Old Testament, as God created a people to bear his image, he taught them what it meant to be holy so that their character would better reflect his own. That was the basis for correction and even exclusion in the Old Testament, as God created a people for himself; and it was the basis for shaping the New Testament church too. Christians are supposed to be conspicuously holy, not for our own reputation but for God's. Jesus tells us to be the light of the world, so that when people see our good works they'll clap us on the back and say, "Good job"? No! So that they'll see our good works and give glory to God. St. Peter says the same thing: "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" (1 Peter 2:12). This is why God has called us and saved us and set us apart (Colossians 1:21-22).

What else should we look like, if we bear Christ's name? St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

**Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.** (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

Right from the beginning, Jesus taught his disciples to teach people to obey all that they had been taught (Matthew 28:19-20). God wants a holy people to reflect his character. The picture of the church at the end of the book of Revelation is of a glorious bride who reflects the character of Christ himself, while, "Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood" (Revelation 22:15).

With 1 Corinthians 5 as a model, the Church has always known that church discipline is one of the boundaries that makes church membership mean something. The assumption is that church members are people who can come to the Lord's Table without bringing disgrace on the church,

condemnation on themselves, or dishonour to God and his Gospel.

Consider the New Testament passages that tell us the requirements for leaders in the Church. We see in those passages that we as Christians bear much more actively the responsibility to have a good name than do people in the world. In our secular courts we require a significant burden of proof in order to charge someone guilty. We presume innocence until we have the hard evidence of guilt. But in the Church, our responsibility is slightly but importantly different. Our lives are the store-front display of God's character in his world. We can't finally determine what others think of us, and we know that we are to expect such strong disapproval that we may even be persecuted for righteousness' sake. But so far as it lies within us, we are to live lives that commend the Gospel to others. We actively bear a responsibility to live lives that will bring praise and glory to God, not dishonour and shame.

Now our biblical theology may explain church discipline. Our teaching and preaching may instruct about it. Our church leaders may encourage it. But, brothers and sisters, it's only the church that may and must finally enforce discipline.

Biblical church discipline is nothing more than obedience to God and a simple confession that we need help. We cannot live the Christian life alone. Our purpose in exercising church discipline is *positive*: for the person disciplined, for other Christians as they see the real danger of sin, for the health of the church as a whole, and for the corporate witness of the church to the world. Most of all, our holiness is to reflect the holiness of God. It should mean something to be a member of the church, not for our pride's sake but for God's name's sake. Biblical church discipline is a mark of a healthy church.

But what if we don't practice church discipline? What does it mean to be a church if our church refuses to obey Scripture on this? Because, you see, this is really a question about the nature of the Church. Professor Wills, who wrote that history of the Southern Baptists, very rightly points out that for Christians living during most of the history of the Church, "A church without discipline would hardly have counted as a church." Consider what I mentioned in my first sermon in this series: that virtually every definition of a true church that we find in the formularies of the Protestant Reformation included not only the

faithful preaching of Scripture and the Gospel, the faithful administration of the Sacrament, but *also the faithful administration of church discipline*. One denomination's *Book of Church Order* puts it very frankly: "When discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it." Those who formed Living Word Church understood this principle well. They left a denomination that had long ago ceased to discipline even the most serious of sins or the most heretical of doctrines—and the end result was that Christ had left. Maybe not so much because Jesus had chosen to leave, but because what had once been a great church turned its back on Jesus.

Friends, we need to live lives that backup our profession of faith. We need to love each other. We need to hold each other accountable because all of us will have times when our flesh wants to go in a way that's different from the way God has revealed in Scripture. And part of the way we love each other is by being honest and establishing relationships with each other and speaking in love to each other. We need to love each other and we need to love those outside our church—the people in the world who are impacted by our witness—and we need to love God, who is holy, and who calls us not to bear his name in vain, but to be holy as he is holy. That's an amazing privilege, but it's also a great responsibility.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, we thank you for the love, mercy, and grace by which you have made us your people, but let us not forget that your desire is to make us into a holy people who will reflect your own holiness to the world. Let us love each other enough that we will be willing to stand up to the challenge of being accountable to each other, and as we hold each other accountable, grow our love for each other, make us increasingly holy, and root us in sound doctrine that our witness to the world might be ever more pure and beautiful, and attractive to a world lost in sin. We ask this in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.

*(Note: This sermon series has been adapted from Mark Dever's book, "Nine Marks of a Healthy Church, Crossway, 2004.)*