

The Discipline of God's Children, Part 3

Scripture: Matthew 18:18–20

Code: 2332

INTRODUCTION

This particular passage speaks of the Lord's command for the holiness of His church. I believe that Jesus Christ desires that the church be pure, and herein is His instruction about our part in that purity:

"Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone; if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church; but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a tax collector. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them by My Father, who is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them."

A. The Portrait of Christ Confronting Sin

In Revelation 1, we see an interesting picture of Christ: In verses 12 and 13, He is moving among the seven lampstands that represent the seven churches of Revelation as well as the universal church. Clothed with the garments of the priest, the King, and the prophet, He appears in His full glory.

1. His Purity from Sin - "His head and His hair were white like wool, as white as snow..." (v. 14a).
2. His Penetration of the Sin - "...and His eyes were like a flame of fire" (v. 14b). He is searching to find any blemish of unholiness in His people.
3. His Punishment upon Sin - "And His feet like fine bronze, as if they burned in a furnace; and His voice like the sound of many waters" (v. 15). We see His judgment character ready to trample out sin and speak the sentence against it in a flood of judgment.

So the Lord is pictured in His purity, looking for the sin in His church that He seeks to purify. But how does the Lord actually deal with sin in His church?

B. The Practice of the Church Confronting Sin

Sin is confronted in the church in three ways: First is the ministry of the Word. The church is sanctified and cleansed "with the washing of water by the word" (Eph. 5:26). Second, the Holy Spirit, also called "the spirit of holiness" in Romans 1:4, has a ministry that is essential to the holiness of the church. Third, I believe the Lord purifies His church not only through the ministry of the Word and the ministry of the Spirit, but through the ministry of the people. I think the outworking of Revelation 1 is in Matthew 18 as Christ is involved in the purging of His church through the instrumentation of those who represent Him in the world. When the church is gathered together in Christ's name for the purpose of discipline, Matthew 18:20 says that He is in the midst of them. In other words, when the church is seeking to maintain its purity, Christ is there in the midst moving among the candlesticks and doing His purifying work. In fact, never is the church more like Jesus Christ than when it is engaged in dealing with sin. Similarly, never are you as an individual more like Jesus Christ than when you are seeking the purity of His church. And yet, across our land, this is not the thinking of people in the church today...and I am amazed at that.

1. The Preaching of Repentance

I was reminded of the church's neglect for its purity when I was speaking at a Bible conference. Having been asked to give a message on the holiness of God, I gladly accepted, because my concurrent work on my book on worship (The Ultimate Priority) had impressed upon my heart the need for the church to be brought face to face with the holiness of God and the sinfulness of sin. I poured out my heart on those issues before a huge crowd, saying that if ever there was to be a real revival in the church, it would be when we again realized that sinful man must fall in brokenness before a holy God to worship Him. Afterwards, a seminary student came up to me and said, "I just have to tell you that I did not appreciate your message at all. You were totally off base. You lacked love. The church's message is love and I didn't find any love at all in your message." Well, it grieved my heart to hear that so I said to this student, "Did you understand what passages I was teaching? Were those passages about love? Is it legitimate to teach a Bible passage the way God wrote it or do we have to weed into every passage the message of love? I think if we do that then we're not really being fair to the Word of God, are we? And maybe the fact that you felt that way is only a demonstration of the lack of balance in your own understanding of God's holiness as over against His love. I think that you probably needed this message and that's evident by your response to it." I tried to be as loving as I could in saying that, but I confess that it was sort of a sad moment to realize that some people want a message exclusively about love without room for anything else.

2. The Prerequisites for a Revival

a. Identified There is nothing wrong with love and I'd be the first person to be thankful for it. Aren't you also thankful for God's love? Sure you are. But I think the kind of love that some people have in mind isn't even the holy love of God. I'm not sure what kind of love it is. I really fear that if seminaries produce people who only want to talk about love, the work of Jesus Christ in the church will never be accomplished the way He wants it to be. It's also interesting to note that many of the same people who are always talking about the need for love, are always emphasizing the need for revival and renewal in the church. They live under an illusion that to revitalize the church and really win the lost, we just have to talk about love all the time on some kind of a sentimental level. They don't understand that the church will never have a revival until it comprehends the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man, out of which true brokenness comes. A tolerant kind of sentimentalism is never going to renew the church.

b. Exemplified If you go back to the Great Awakening in the 1700's, particularly under the ministry of Jonathan Edwards, you will find that the two elements which were responsible for its great impact, were the same elements that characterized every other revival: powerful preaching on the holiness of God, and powerful preaching on the sinfulness of sin. In spite of the fact that public invitations to receive Christ hadn't even been invented in the time of Jonathan Edwards, a real revival still occurred (invitations didn't come until Finney...and I don't think we have a great sense of debt to what Finney did in sort of manipulating people through his invitation system). People would be screaming and crying for Edwards to stop preaching, because his sermons on the holiness of God and the devastation of sin would put them under so much conviction. His preaching may have had some excesses and may have been a little too harsh, but no one can deny the impact that he made.

3. The Protection from Reality

As you go from the 18th into the 19th century, there was a drift away from the power of preaching about the holiness of God and the sinfulness of sin and an increase in preaching about love, because people feared some of the extremes of the past. Richard Lovelace from Gordon Conwell writes: "The whole church was...avoiding the biblical portrait of the sovereign and holy God who was angry with the wicked every day and whose anger remains upon those who will not receive His Son. Walling off this image into an unvisited corner of its consciousness, the church substituted a new god who was the projection of grand-motherly kindness mixed with the gentleness and winsomeness of a Jesus who hardly needed to die for our sins. Many American congregations were, in effect, paying their ministers to protect them from the real God.... It is partially responsible not only for the general

spiritual collapse of the church in this century, but also for a great deal of [evangelistic] weakness; for in a world in which the sovereign and holy God regularly employs plagues, famines, wars, disease, and death as instruments to punish sin and bring mankind to repentance, the idolatrous image of God as pure benevolence [love] cannot really be believed, let alone feared and worshiped in the manner prescribed by both the Old Testament and New Testament."

In other words, when there is only a sentimental view of love, it will never renew the church because it never really causes people to face their sin, and it will never enable the church to evangelize. People think that if you just talk about how God loves everybody, you will be able to effectively evangelize. But apologetically you have a tremendous problem, because on the one hand you're proclaiming a God who is all love, and then on the other hand you are stuck trying to defend how such a God can allow plagues, disease, disaster, war, and famines to exist. That is why we must proclaim a holy God who has a holy hatred of sin...then that apparent paradox makes sense. Unless the church comes back to a message of the holiness of God and the sinfulness of sin, it will never be renewed, its evangelism will be shallow and ineffective, and it will be unable to explain to an unbeliever how a loving God allows what He does. Removing God's holy hatred of sin essentially emasculates the church and hinders rather than helps evangelism.

4. The Pride of Religiosity

There are a lot of people who think that a revival may have taken place when it may have been little else than emotion. Jonathan Edwards was well aware of this. In a treatise concerning religious affections, which he wrote in 1776, he was very concerned to make it known that "fallen human nature is fertile ground for a fleshly religiosity which is impressively 'spiritual' but ultimately rooted in self-love. High emotional experiences, effusive religious talk, and even praising God and experiencing love for God and man can be self-centered and self-motivated. In contrast to this, experiences of renewal which are genuinely from the Holy Spirit are God-centered in character and based on worship, an appreciation of God's worth and grandeur divorced from self-interest. Such genuine experiences create humility in the convert rather than pride and issue in a new creation and a new spirit of meekness, gentleness, forgiveness, and mercy. They leave the believer hungering and thirsting for righteousness instead of satiated with self-congratulation."

In other words, true revival isn't people saying, "We've arrived spiritually"; it's people being broken over the sense that they have not arrived. So if you wonder whether current trends in Christianity mark a genuine revival, ask yourself, "Does it mark itself by an overwhelming sense of the holiness of God, a comprehensive sense of the depth of sin, a spiritual experience that results in brokenness rather than self-congratulation? That's the stuff that makes for true revival. Because when you have in the church today this incessant talk about love, acceptance, tolerance, self-esteem, and the presumption that God wants you healthy, wealthy, and happy, then you are really at the very opposite pole from the elements of genuine revival. And the reason for this is that the church, not understanding the holiness of God, doesn't deal with the sinfulness of sin and consequently never purges itself. But though Christ wants to purge His church so that it reflects His glory, never will it be more like Him than when it is acting out Matthew 18:15-20 in dealing with sin.

Lovelace also says, "Most congregations of professing Christians today are saturated with a kind of dead goodness, an ethical respectability which has its motivational roots in the flesh rather than in the...Holy Spirit. Surface righteousness which does not spring from faith and the Spirit's renewing action, but from religious pride and conditioned conformity to tradition as a form of godliness which denies its power." He accurately calls this superficial religiosity, "counterfeit piety." We have to get back to the essential element of revival so clearly stated by John Owen: "The vigor and power of the spiritual life depend upon the mortification of sin." Sin has to be faced, exposed, and dealt with.

5. The Purpose of Redemption

Now I believe this is what Christ wants to do in His church. He came into the world to do one thing, and that was the Father's will (Jn. 5:19; 5:30; 6:38; 7:16 etc.). And the will of the Father can be

reduced to one statement made in 1 Peter 1:15-16: "But, as He who hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of life, because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy" (cf. Lev. 11:44).

If you want to take all the will of God in its broadest possible scope and condense it to one statement, it is simply that God wants His people holy. That is why Christ is moving in His church with searching eyes, ready to purge and to cleanse. In the Kingdom, Isaiah 35:8 says that He will establish a highway called "the way of holiness." In James 4:8-10, we are exhorted, "Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye doubleminded. Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep; let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He shall lift you up [exalt you]." God is calling for a purging and a purifying, and that is the work of Christ in the church. He does it through the Word, the Spirit, and the work of the people. The Word does its part as it is proclaimed. The Spirit does His part as He moves in the heart to convict. But we are to join the Word and the Spirit, acting on behalf of Christ in the presence of His church to seek its purity. And the prescription for that is in verses 15 to 20. We are to be Christ, moving in His church.

REVIEW

I. THE PLACE OF DISCIPLINE (v. 17)

II. THE PURPOSE OF DISCIPLINE (v. 15b)

III. THE PERSON IN DISCIPLINE (v. 15)

IV. THE PROVOCATION OF DISCIPLINE (v. 15a)

V. THE PROCESS OF DISCIPLINE (vv. 15-17)

A. Step One: Telling Them The Sin (v. 15b)

B. Step Two: Taking Some Witnesses (v. 16)

C. Step Three: Telling The Church (v. 17a)

D. Step Four: Treating Them As Outsiders (v. 17b)

Now we come to the last aspect of discipline in this passage:

VI. THE POWER OF DISCIPLINE (vv. 18-22)

If you want to use another word than power, use the word authority. When you come to the end of verse 17, you are bound to sense a feeling of inadequacy about church discipline. If you're like I am, you might say, "Well, who in the world am I to go to somebody else and confront them with their sin?" What right do we have to carry discipline to the point of putting someone out of the church? I'm not an Apostle, and I'm certainly not perfect. Then, to make matters worse, people want to misinterpret Matthew 7:1: "Judge not, that ye be not judged." What right do we have to do that? How can we possibly publicize people's sin to the whole church and send everybody out after them, let alone to put people out of the church publicly? Doesn't this seem like we're going way beyond the bounds that would be permissible to us, the weak and failing sinners that we are? What is our authority? By what power and right do we do this? The answer to this we find in verses 18 to 20, which is the absolute climax of this text. The first reason that we have the authority is that...

A. The Father In Heaven Acts with Us (vv. 18-19)

1. The Authority of Discipline (v. 18)

"Verily [truly], I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

It is beyond my ability to conceive that I could be acting in concert with the infinite holy God in terms of binding and loosening. These are rabbinical terms that would be very familiar to the Jewish audience living at the time of our Lord. They simply refer to the rabbis either binding someone's sins on them or loosing their sins from them. In other words, a person could be told that they were still under the bondage of sin, or were freed from sin. When an earthly authority would say, "You are still bound with sin," it would already have been bound in heaven. On the other hand, if they were told,

"Your sins are loosed," heaven would have already freed the person from his sins as well. Because the terms for the binding and the loosening that heaven does appear in the Greek in the perfect passive form, it means that the earthly judgment has already been done in heaven with continuing results. Therefore, when the church finally gets around to saying, "Your sins are bound on you," or "Your sins are loosed from you," it is then beginning to act in accord with the Father who is in heaven, who has already determined that judgment based upon whether the person responded to the conviction of sin or not. The point is that heaven ratifies what is done on earth when the church follows this process of discipline. The Father in heaven is our authority.

If you are a sinning person in a church and somebody goes to you and you don't repent, and two or three go to you and you don't repent, and the whole church is pursuing you and you don't repent, we can say that your sins are bound on you, because we have gone through the process to determine that based upon the revelation of the Word of God. When we say that, we are simply saying what the Father has already determined in heaven. The church, therefore, is merely acting on the behalf of the will of God--the Father in heaven is acting with us. What a tremendous truth!

On the other hand, if you are in sin and we go to you and you eventually repent with a broken heart, grieving over your sin and turning from it, we can say that your sins are loosed and thereupon welcome you into the fullness of the fellowship. We are merely doing on earth what has already been done in heaven. We are acting in behalf of the Father's authority in heaven who has already done what is right to do in your case.

Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

The church may say that it wants to do the will of God, but how many people stand up and say this phrase in the Lord's Prayer, yet never do what it says? Do you want to do God's will on earth as it is in heaven? Then you must carry out the process of discipline and heaven will have already done what you did down here. Discipline is an answer to that prayer in Matthew 6:9-12, which was given as a pattern to the Disciples. It reinforces the fact that never is the church more like Jesus Christ in fulfilling the will of God, than when it acts out the principles of this passage. That is taking the Kingdom in heaven and bringing it to earth. As our authority, heaven stands with us. You say, "Well, how can it be our authority?" Because we have followed the biblical pattern. We are only expressing what God has already decided.

When I met a man who had been in a "Christian" organization for years, and he described to me what he believed one was supposed to do to get to heaven, I was able to tactfully tell him, "My friend, you are lost in your sin. You don't know God or Jesus Christ and consequently, your sins are not forgiven." I had the authority to bind his sins on him because he didn't meet the biblical conditions of repentance. Furthermore, we have the right to say to a sinning Christian, "You, my friend, are bound in your sin." In that case, the Father in heaven is acting with you when you say that. Isn't that a marvelous thing to become the ambassador of heaven on earth?

It's very comforting for me to know that heaven supports me in the process of discipline, because people often think that if you try to confront sin and call it what it is, you are being unloving. But what you're really doing is fighting God's battle and lining up with heaven. It's so hard to convince people of that in this day, because this sentimental kind of love has gotten completely out of perspective.

2. The Agreement in Discipline (v. 19)

"Again I say unto you that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them by My Father, who is in heaven."

What is the issue that is being dealt with here? The disciplining of sin. Therefore, the things that are being agreed upon are discipline situations. This verse also fits in the context of discipline because the two people that are mentioned constitute the lowest number of people who can confirm a person in the sin. So, when you've gone and confirmed a person in his response to sin, and you agree and you seek God's will on it, then God will be acting with you on the matter. In other words, when two

witnesses confirm that the person's heart is repentant or not repentant, then God is acting in heaven in accord with that. That's great authority! The Greek word for "agree," *sumphoneo*, (from which symphony is derived) literally means "to produce a sound together." Hence, when all of you are in harmony with regard to the person you are confronting, the Father also will be in agreement with you. Now I don't think this verse is talking about a blank check for prayer, although it has been utterly ripped out of its context and misapplied in this way. Furthermore, the verse doesn't mean that if you can get any two people to agree, God has to give you what you're agreeing for. That isn't the point. The two here are the two witnesses in a case of church discipline regarding a sinning person, and they really want God's will to be done. So, when they agree over this issue after having followed the biblical pattern, they can be confident, that in their seeking for God's will, they will receive it, and God will do what is right.

That is a very important confidence to have, because when you move into discipline, you may wonder, "I hope I'm doing what's right. Maybe I'm being too judgmental." I've had that feeling as I have questioned my actions, saying, "Maybe I'm being too harsh and not sensitive enough. But I just don't see the repentance and contrition in this person's life." However, I must rely upon what the Scripture says, that if it's been confirmed and we all are in symphony, reading the same signs in the same way, as we ask for God's wisdom, then we can know the Father is acting in accord with us. Isn't that a marvelous confidence? We don't fear to discipline, because when we do so, we are carrying out the will of the Father that His people be holy.

Not only does the Father in heaven act with us, but...

B. The Son on Earth Acts with Us (v. 20)

"For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them."

Now you've probably heard that applied to the prayer meetings you've been at: "If we can just get two or three people together, God will be there." But if you've just got one person, God is still there, right? I used to worry about that when I was a kid because I heard some people preach on that verse, and I thought, "Well, what happens when one person prays?" Prayer isn't what the context is about. What are the two or three in this context? They are the witnesses in a discipline situation. The misinterpretation of these verses shows us why it's so important to teach the flow of the Scripture. What does Jesus mean when He says, "...gathered together in My name..."? "To do My work," Jesus says, "of moving among the church, and gathering to reflect My character and My will. I am in the midst of that type of activity." Isn't that a great confidence? Not only is the Father acting in heaven with us, but the Son is there on earth with us. Never are you more fulfilling the will of God and the work of the Son, than when you are acting in the purging and the purifying of His own church. We all have to be a part of that as ministers of holiness.

Conclusion In closing, just a word about the sinning brother or sister. We really need to bring them back, don't we? We can't just let them go. They need to be brought back. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian of rather liberal persuasion who lived through some of the terrors of Nazi Germany, wrote a little book called *Life Together* that contains some very profound thoughts provide some insight on this issue of restoration:

"Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person. This can happen even in the midst of a pious community. In confession the light of the gospel breaks into the darkness and seclusion of the heart. The sin must be brought into the light. The unexpressed must be openly spoken and acknowledged. All that is secret and hidden is made manifest. It is a hard struggle until the sin is openly admitted, but God breaks gates of brass and bars of iron (Ps. 107:16).

"Since the confession of sin is made in the presence of a Christian brother, the last stronghold of self-justification is abandoned. The sinner surrenders; he gives up all his evil. He gives his heart to

God, and he finds the forgiveness of all his sin in the fellowship of Jesus Christ and his brother. The expressed, acknowledged sin has lost all its power. It has been revealed and judged as sin. It can no longer tear the fellowship asunder. Now the fellowship bears the sin of the brother. He is no longer alone with his evil for he has cast off his sin in confession and handed it over to God. It has been taken away from him. Now he stands in the fellowship of sinners who live by the grace of God and the cross of Jesus Christ.... The sin concealed separated him from the fellowship, made all his apparent fellowship a sham; the sin confessed has helped him define true fellowship with the brethren in Jesus Christ."

What a ministry...the ministry of restoring the sinning brother! It is the key to the purity of the church and its subsequent renewal that will enable it to reach the world.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What is Christ pictured as doing in His church as indicated in Revelation 1?
2. In what three ways is the church purified?
3. When is the church most like Jesus Christ?
4. What must sinful man do before there will be true revival in the church?
5. What attribute of God do many people overemphasize to the exclusion of God's holiness?
6. What two topics in powerful preaching were responsible for the great revivals in history?
7. Why is a sentimental view of God's love unable to renew the church?
8. What objection might you face if you proclaimed a God who is all love?
9. What one thing did Christ come into the world to do?
10. In a brief statement, summarize the will of God?
11. What is the two-fold authority we have in carrying out church discipline?
12. Explain what it means to be bound with sins or loosed from them.
13. Explain how discipline can be an answer to the Lord's Prayer.
14. When you confront sin and call it what it is, what might people accuse you of being? What comfort can you gain in the process of discipline?
15. What are the issues that are being agreed upon in Matthew 18:19, on the basis of the context? What is the significance of the two people mentioned?
16. Why don't we need to fear disciplining?
17. Explain why Matthew 18:20 is not a promise that any prayers that are prayed will be answered.
18. What does Jesus expect those who are gathered together in His name to reflect?

Pondering the Principles

1. Richard Lovelace accurately analyzed the problem with many churches when he said, "Most congregations of professing Christians today are saturated with a kind of dead goodness, an ethical respectability which has its motivational roots in the flesh rather than in the...Holy Spirit." If you believe that correctly represents the church you attend, commit yourself to pray daily for its spiritual health. As you ask God to use you in making your local church all that He desires it to be, determine the various things you can do to stimulate other Christians "unto love and to good works" (Heb. 10:24b). Do you need to express your heart to a spiritually mature leader in your church? Maybe you can begin to teach a Bible study or an adult Sunday school class. Or maybe you can suggest to your pastor some sermon topics that might be of immediate value to the spiritual growth of your congregation. Whatever action you decide to take, make sure that your "motivational roots" are in the Spirit for the glory of God, rather than in yourself for what you can accomplish.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation." Do you agree with that statement? Why, or why not? Read Hebrews 10:24-25 and 12:12-15. What specific ways can you implement these two passages in your church? Make a list of some believers

you know who are in need of spiritual healing and encouragement. Next find some verses which apply to their situation and take time to drop them a note or meet with them personally. Don't let sin continue to isolate them from the refreshing fellowship of the body of Christ.

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