

DEALING WITH SIN IN THE CHURCH  
May 14/2000

INTRO: There are two major institutions which have at least several things in common. These are the family, the Church and government. Furthermore, there are some ingredients in a good church and a good home that are the same and one of those is discipline. Every church and every home must have some form of discipline. By discipline I mean some type of action that is taken if there is improper or disruptive behaviour. Decisions must be made as to what type of action is to be taken for each type of disobedience. When disobedience is tolerated then somewhere greater disobedience will take place. Listen to Ecclesiasties 8:11; *Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.*

Since it is essential that a good church be a well disciplined church, it is understandable then that the Lord has given instructions in His Word for those matters which require discipline and what kind of discipline is to be given.

As I have considered this topic for many years and have observed the reaction of people to this topic I have come to the conclusion that this is a very misunderstood subject. When I teach the doctrine of sin in Bible School one assignment I give is on Church discipline. I give the students only those passages that deal with this matter in the NT and then using their Bibles, they write a paper on Church discipline. In one class, after the students had finished their homework I asked the next morning, "Now what would happen in your church if you insisted on doing what the Bible teaches?" And one student without a moment's hesitation said, "They'd kick you out." Now those were his words. What he meant was if you insisted on following the Scriptures in this matter you would find yourself rejected by that church.

I do think that the secular world has largely influenced the Christian's view of family discipline. And in turn, our secularly influenced view of family discipline has crept into the church so that the Scriptures that deal with this topic are foreign to many Christians.

I. THE PREREQUISITES TO DEALING WITH SIN

A. Recognize the Scriptures as Authoritative

One of the things I will refrain from during these messages is to build my case on positive examples. I believe we ought to obey Scripture whether we have

cases that are either positive or negative. Let us say you have heard of a church that disciplined a certain believer and that believer committed suicide. Could you say that church discipline should not be exercised because in that case it had negative consequences? Or, on the other hand, let us say a certain church has not exercised discipline on a number of occasions and each time things worked out OK. Should we reject the practice of church discipline because it has good results? I believe that the exercise of church discipline should not be based chiefly on results, whether they are positive or negative. The practice of church discipline should be based on what God says about it. So we must turn to the Bible for instruction on this matter.

We do not need to understand exactly how church discipline works, but we do need to obey the Scriptures on this matter. When I was going to Bible school the Dean of Students had a sign on his door which said, "Understanding can wait, obedience can't."

So before we consider church discipline we must establish that the Bible is authoritative. Whether you or I agree with it or not does not change this truth.

## B. Beware of the Extremes

### 1. Too much or wrong discipline

As we begin to consider this topic you may say, "I have come from a church where church discipline was practiced for many little details. People were allowed to drink and smoke and live in immorality and yet others were disciplined for having one braid in their hair instead of two or for attending a Bible study. From what I have seen of Church discipline, for my part, I wish you would skip this topic. It's too dangerous." Such a view comes from having observed wrong discipline or too much discipline.

When one obeys God in discipline, care must always be taken against extremes. I like tabasco sauce. It is quite a hot sauce. But there are some foods on which a little tabasco sauce just finishes it real nice. A tabasco sauce bottle is small. You only need a few drops. And the hole on the end is small and just lets it out a drop or two at a time. Now you can ruin a good dish if you put too much tabasco sauce on it.

Furthermore, there are some foods which simply are not suited to tabasco sauce. I never use it for certain foods and have never put any on desert yet. When you use it for everything it loses its goodness. So it is with church discipline. It must not be used for certain types of problems and it must not be overused.

## 2. No discipline

If wrong use or overuse of Church discipline tends to bad results, so does no discipline. Ecclesiastes 8:11 says, "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the hearts of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil."

We know what happens in a country when the law protects the evil doer. We know what happens in a family where discipline is not practiced. The children set the pace and mom and dad are kept busy trying to please the children. Then, after mom and dad have spent 13, 14, 15 years of pleasing their children, they cannot figure out why their children then become rebellious.

Is it not amazing that we should recognize the need for discipline in the home and in a country and fail to recognize the need in the church? The problems created by no discipline are insurmoutable.

So then, the two extremes to be avoided are too much discipline or discipline for the wrong purpose and no discipline.

## C. Commendation When Good is Done (Rom. 15:14)

I would like to point out another thing that I think is important as a prerequisite to Church discipline. It is a principle found in Romans 15:14. We studied through this section recently in our Romans study on Wednesday evening Bible studies. Maxwell asks, "Is Paul to be charged with flattery and false optimism?" The answer was "No." The next question was, "How is Paul's principle of approach illustrative and indicative of all truly great and loving hearts?" The answer was, "Such people praise others where they can."

If we are ready to discipline when discipline is in order, are we ready to give recognition or commendation when good is done? Though this needs to be exercised with as much discernment as discipline,

I think there are times when it is in order. When we do not exercise discipline the consequences are bad. When we do not exercise commendation the long term consequences are negative.

Discipline serves as a warning to others and thus can help them avoid it. Commendation, on the other hand, can encourage others to seek to achieve a higher goal. I believe that when certain persons in the church have disciplined themselves above the average in, say taking a course of Biblical studies, or memorizing Scripture or reading through the entire Bible that recognition by a certificate or some other manner is perfectly in order. We are not exalting or trying to flatter certain people. We are recognizing their accomplishments publically.

Part of Church discipline is the public recognition of that matter and it will encourage believers not to do the same. The exact reverse is true in public commendation. It will encourage others to do better. Note how Paul recognizes certain people in Rome when he wrote to them (See Romans 16:1-15. Note the person named and the reason for it.)

#### D. Understand the Purpose

Before church discipline is exercised the purpose of such action should be clearly understood. This makes teaching or preaching on the subject imperative. I sometimes hear church discipline referred to as "kicked out". This term should never be used by Christians. It distorts the meaning and purpose of church discipline to such an extent as to make it seem entirely wrong for a church to exercise discipline. The purpose of church discipline must always be corrective in nature. The aim is to restore. I would liken it to surgery. As painful as surgery is, it is not to get even with someone or to punish them. It is corrective in nature and the purpose is to restore to health.

#### E. United Leadership

Another prerequisite to healthy church discipline is a united leadership. I compare it to leadership in the home again and I do so on the basis of Scripture. Paul writes in 1 Timothy 3:4-5 that a pastor must be one who has his "children in submission with all reverence." This requires discipline. Then the passage goes on to say, "For if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?" The answer to that question is that if he does not know how to lead so that his own

children are in submission he will not know how to lead the church in this way either.

In discipline in the home, husband and wife relationship is very important. If they are not united and agreed, good discipline will be very difficult. It stands to reason then that in church discipline church leaders should will need to be united and agreed. I am reminded of a little story about Johny. His mother sent him to his room for some missbehaviour until she had time to come deal with him. Meanwhile dad came home and mother told him what had taken place and would he take care of it. So up to Johny's room he went but his son was nowhere to be seen. He called several times when he heard a little voice say, "Hi daddy, is mommy trying to get you too?" He did not realize that mommy and daddy were together on this matter.

I would like to add that on judgement day the dad will give account for discipline or non-discipline whether the wife agrees with it or not. In the church the pastor is going to be ultimately held accountable before God. In Revelation 2-3 seven churches are addressed. Each one begins with these words, "To the angel of the church of ...." The word angel is the Greek word *angelos* and means *messenger*. In other passages it is rendered as messenger. I do not believe that one of God's angels is going to be held accountable for the disobedience of our church. I believe it will be I myself who will be held accountable.

#### F. Be Prepared to be Labeled

In our age, it is hard to set a standard, whether it be in the home or in the church, without being labeled a legalist. I believe that there is a general misunderstanding in our age about legalism. As I see it, generally, today, any family or church that has standards which exceed those around them causes them to be viewed as legalistic. Churches with standards and rules are viewed as legalists.

This calls for a definition of legalism with regard to salvation. What is legalism in the church? *Legalism is any teaching which teaches that we attain salvation by doing certain works.* Sometimes these works are added to the teaching of salvation by grace through faith. Any work whatsoever, no matter how good, when added as a requirement of salvation is legalism. Legalism is not setting standars and making certain rules based on Scripture for those who are already saved. If that were the case we would all be

legalists. The only difference would be the degree of legalism.

Some churches teach salvation by grace through faith but set certain detailed rules for their people, such as wearing one kind of clothing or driving only certain colors of vehicles etc... If they do not add any of these rules to the message of salvation, I believe they do not fall under the label of legalism. But there are at least two grave dangers that face such a church. First, it tends to develop into legalism. Second, such churches tend to view those who do not follow their rules as second rate Christians or not Christians at all. I personally class such persons or churches as legalistic.

So I would encourage any church that sets biblical standards that exceed those around them and exercises church discipline when deemed necessary to be prepared to be classed as legalists. And if that should happen, my encouragement would be to simply accept it without argument. And never harbor ill feelings towards such people. If opportunity comes to explain, fine. If not, God will take care of it. I have been a long time in learning this lesson and still have to work at it.

#### G. Discipline in Love

Last, I would like to draw on another principle from family discipline. If it is to be exercised with maximum affect, it must be done in love. Here it becomes necessary to make a distinction between discipline and punishment. *Discipline proceeds from love and is exercised in order to correct and restore the offender. Punishment proceeds from justice and is meant for retribution.*

I believe that love and the aim to restore the offender should be the motivating factor in all church discipline. However, let me explain what I mean by love. The home is a good place to illustrate what I mean. In our age there are many parents who do not discipline under the guise of love. By love they mean the affectionate emotions between a parent and child. Because of these emotions they are not able to bring themselves to set standards that displease their children or to inflict pain.

That is not what I am talking about when I speak of love. Turn with me to Prov. 13:24 (read). You see, the emotional love which does not take into consideration the well-being of that child in the future is in actual fact hate, according to the

writer of Proverbs. The Hebrew word for love here is a general word for love. As I considered this word in its context I could not help but think that if this were translated into Greek the word agapee would be used for love and when I checked the Greek Septuagint, that is the case exactly. Agapee love is not a feeling based love. It is based on doing what is right and for the other person's good.

I would like to go back to my illustration on physical surgery. Let me ask you which of the following doctors truly cares for his patient. Both doctors have diagnosed their own father and found that he has serious cancer. However, with the right treatment, treatment that will be very painful, the father's chances of living are 98%.

The first doctor has very strong emotional attachments to his father and says, "Dad, you have a cancer that is serious. But we have a treatment that has a 98% chance of curing this cancer. The treatment is very painful, but I am not only willing to do this for you but want to encourage you with all my heart to do it. Without the treatment you will probably live only another month." The second doctor, with equally strong emotional attachments to his dad and cannot bear to see him suffer says, "Looks like nothing too serious dad. It will cause you discomfort for a while but it's nothing serious." Do I need to ask you which doctor truly loves his dad?

You will say, "But, that is a poor illustration. Doesn't the second doctor see that without treatment his dad will go through pain too. Does he not know that he really isn't getting his dad out of suffering?" Listen for a moment, can we not see that the erring child or church member who is left without painful discipline, will not only suffer later, but will cause suffering? (Prov. 29:15.)

When I say discipline in love, I mean doing what we know is right to do regardless of the pain.

CONCL: Let me briefly review the message this morning. 1 We must recognize that it is not what I think but what the Bible says that is most important. The Bible is authoritative. 2 Then, if we are willing to correct publically where wrong is done, are we ready to commend publically where good is achieved? 3 Third, we must always remember that the purpose of dealing with sin is corrective and redemptive in nature and it should never be labeled as "kicked out of the church." 4 Fourth, to be most effective it is important that the leadership of the church is united on this matter. 5 When a church decides

to take the Scriptures seriously on this matter and finds discipline necessary, it is good to be prepared to be labeled as having fallen under legalism or even as a cult. 6 Our last point this morning was to remember that all discipline should proceed from love. We said that true love is not the strong emotional ties to the person to be disciplined but a willingness to do that which will benefit the wrongdoer.

In the next message I wish to cover one more prerequisite and that is a need to understand judgement. It has become a very common thing to hear that we are not to judge. Our present understanding of judgement must be corrected before church discipline will find its rightful place in the church.