



**BETHEL**  
PRESBYTERIAN

## **MINISTRY OF THE WORD**

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### **Church Discipline, Part 5**

Reality is comprised of two kingdoms, only two. In fact, the Bible is replete with language which testifies to the existence both of the Kingdom of God and of the Kingdom of Satan.

- The Kingdom of God/heaven, Matthew 4:17.
- The throne of God, Matthew 5:34; Revelation 7:15.
- The armies of God, Isaiah 1:24.
- The authority of God to rule, Psalm 146:10.

- Captains, Joshua 5:14-15.
- Soldiers, Philippians 2:25; 2 Timothy 2:3-4.
- Warfare, 2 Corinthians 10:3-6.
- Weapons, 2 Corinthians 10:3-6.
- Armor, Ephesians 6:13-20.
- Fiery missiles of the evil one, Ephesians 6:16.
- Angelic clashes with demons, Daniel 10:12-13.
- Military schemes/strategies, Ephesians 6:11.
- A clash between the children of God and the servants of Satan, Revelation 16:13-14.

For example, we read this when Jesus speaking to Pilate:

John 18:36, “Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.’”

2 Corinthians 10:3a, “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh...”

Ephesians 6:12, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”

Truly, there is a war raging in this world today... a war whose focus and prize NOT ONLY is the glory, honor, and authority of God, BUT ALSO the souls of men! Now there are times when the kingdom of Satan wins a decisive victory and a member of a body of Christ defects. When this occurs what is our responsibility toward the one who has defected? Who has been “...hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Hebrews 3:13). How do we go about reclaiming that one?

When it comes to our responsibility, notice that the formal process of discipline includes the discipline of deliverance.

Matthew 18:15a: “And if your brother sins...”

I want to stop briefly and point out that the language Christ used here evokes the thought of love, concern, and care when it comes to the struggling Christian. Church discipline is NOT the result of a religiously arrogant people kicking someone out of their club. RATHER, it is the actions of tough love which the world endorses in the case of an intervention on the part of a family member struggling with alcohol. The goal is NOT to remove the loved one from one’s life, BUT to stop them in their descent to the grave! And so we read of this in Matthew:

Matthew 18:15-17, “And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen *to you*, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And

if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer.”

So when it comes to going after a brother or sister plunging to their death on account of their sin, the process involves three specific steps:

## Step #1: The Love of Encouragement, v. 15.

Matthew 18:15, “And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.”

With this step, when one notices a lapse in a brother or sister’s relationship with God, you go to your brother. Maybe you see it in:

- The way they have begun to talk.
- The company they have been keeping.
- Their dress.
- Their relationship with their parent or spouse.

And what ought we to do? “Reprove” them. The word for “reprove” is ἐλέγχω (*elegchō*) refers to “exposing something with light” and thus is showing a person their sin in such a way that they cannot escape recognizing it for what it is. That’s the calling!

Now the command here is NOT to go to your neighbor and ask if they saw what you saw, or even to one of the elders and tell on them. RATHER it is to “go” to the one for whom you are concerned and talk to them and so find out what is going on. In the fact, this may sound radical, BUT it is so important that we heed the command and do exactly as Christ taught here!

The command is NOT to:

- Write an email.
- Send a text.
- Reply to the person on Facebook or some other form of social media.

RATHER, the command is to go to the other individual in person and actually talk, hold a conversation!

Now I understand that because of our phones, Facebook, social media, and email, we are not used to talking with people face to face because media provides a layer of protection for our fragile dispositions. But you have to understand that God is wise and knows what is best! When a brother or sister is in need of correction, the answer is NOT to ignore them or resort to social media to correct them, BUT “to go and reprove them in private.” That means, one on

one, in person!

It is amazing how so many, even in leadership, violate this very simple, straight forward command! I know of a gentleman who was disciplined by his church from the start through excommunication via email! Hear this carefully: this violates God's word! Now if the conversation ends at an impasse where the brother or sister says, *"I don't care what you think or say; I'm not going to give up my sin."*, then you go to step two.

## Step #2: The Love of *Group* Encouragement, v. 16.

Matthew 18:16, "But if he does not listen *to you*, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed."

Here you invite a brother or sister to join you in another attempt at talking with the struggling Christian face to face. If still they won't listen to you and they persist in their path of destruction you go to step three.

It should be stressed that each of these "steps" are not necessarily one-time conversations. Rather, they most often reflect a dialogue between us and the one who is lapsing. In other words, this is NOT love by check-list! The text presupposes a relationship... which involves time, concern, care, and a willingness to get involved. Again, they are your "brother" or sister!

Now if in the estimation of those involved the lapsing brother or sister simply will not give up their sin, then the discipline moves to step three.

## Step #3: The Love of Formal Pastoral Care, v. 17.

Matthew 18:17, "And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer."

This is where the elders get involved and begin a more formal process of pastoral care. If the person continues in their unrepentance, a trial eventually will take place where the child of God is formally charged, tried, judged, and sentenced.

It is at this point, if unrepentance should persist ("...if he refuses to listen even to the church..."), that the elders come to see that God has already given the individual over to Satan. Accordingly, the elders say, "Amen" to the will of God, and so follow the Lord's example. The brother or sister is pronounced a non-Christian- which means that they are removed from the visible body of Christ and so are to the church "...as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer."

Now, this doesn't mean that they aren't saved. We don't know; that is up to God. Yet as it pertains to their status as a formal member in the covenant community, they are removed. As

such and at this time, they are formerly handed over to Satan “for the destruction of their flesh” (1 Corinthians 5:5).

## The Participants of Discipline, Galatians 6:1

Galatians 6:1, “Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; *each one* looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted.”

This passage addresses the ones qualified to engage in formal church discipline. Now before we discuss the wording of this text, I want to ask you a question. When it comes to the fellowship we enjoy with one another as members of the body of Christ, who is qualified to participate?

The answer is everyone (Christian) in good standing. If you are seated at someone’s home following the service and a teenager sits next to you, is it appropriate for him to ask you, “What struck you from this morning’s message?”? What if you didn’t know the youth very well? Would it still be appropriate? Most certainly!

So, it is with every one of us when it comes to “formal discipline” (in fact, we could define “formal discipline” as intensified, personalized fellowship,” nothing more). Truly, familiarity is not a prerequisite. In fact, the only qualification referenced here is that the initiator be one “who is spiritual.”

What does that mean? The word for “spiritual” (πνευματικός [*pneumatikos*]) refers NOT to a mature brother or sister, BUT simply to any and all who at that moment in their lives are living in submission to the word of God and so: (1) walking in the Spirit, (2) filled with the Spirit, or (3) manifesting the fruit of the Spirit. In other words, the issue here is NOT that of maturity in Christ, BUT ones submission to the Lord! Dr. John MacArthur put it this way:

It should be noted that, whereas maturity is relative, depending on one’s progression and growth, spirituality is an absolute reality that is unrelated to growth. At any point in the life of a Christian, from the moment of his salvation to his glorification, he is either spiritual, walking in the Spirit, or fleshly, walking in the deeds of the flesh. Maturity is the cumulative effect of the times of spirituality. But any believer, at any point in his growth toward Christlikeness, can be a spiritual believer who helps a sinful believer who has fallen to the flesh. (MacArthur, 1987, p. 177)

And so, who is qualified to engage in church discipline? Anyone submitting to the word of God, whether they’ve been saved for ten minutes or fifty years. Did you get that?

In ministry I’ve had people approach me and say “I’m concerned about so and so. Yet *I don’t know them* so I can’t talk to them.” Or “I’m concerned about so and so. Yet *I’m not much of a*

*church leader* so I can't talk to them." Brothers and sisters, the only qualification for those who participate in church discipline is whether they themselves are submitting to the word of God. If you are at that moment, then you are qualified to talk to anyone with whom you are concerned.

## The Aftermath of Discipline, Matthew 18:17; 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15.

Matthew 18:17b, "...and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer."

It is important to note that Christ here doesn't say that the person who has been excommunicated from a church body is not saved. Again, we do not know this; that is up to God. Rather what it does say is that the person so disciplined- — the person whose standing as a member of the body of Christ has been removed — is to be *viewed* or *treated* as a Gentile/tax-collector. What does this imply? What is your view of someone in the Kingdom of Satan who has become subject to His attack and Satan "sifts them like wheat"?

These are ones in need of our prayer and concern! So, it is with any who have been excommunicated from a covenant community. They no longer have the status of brother or sister of Christ (they are not members of His visible body and so no longer enjoy God's protection), BUT that doesn't mean we wash our hands of them. You say, what about 2 Thessalonians 3?

2 Thessalonians 3:14-15, "And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame. And *yet* do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."

This text classically has been used to advocate a practice called *shunning*. What is this? Shunning occurs when one of your brothers or sisters by birth is disciplined by a church and in this case, the family in good standing is not allowed to associate with this person in any way. If the person shows up at a family gathering, the Christian is to leave. If the person calls or stops by, they are to be ignored. After all, according to this view the text says, "do not associate with him."

However, this is at best a misreading of the text! Does the passage say that we are to have no contact with the individual? No! In fact, notice the very next verse:

1 Thessalonians 3:15, "And *yet* do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."

If you are NOT to be in the presence of a disciplined person, how can you "admonish him as a

brother”? You can’t! In fact, the word for admonish is *νουθετέω* (*noutheteō*) which is a primary element in pastoral care. It does NOT imply barking orders, BUT bringing God’s word to bear upon the lives of people (it involves a relationship).

That is what we are called to do here. Accordingly when Paul says that we are “not to associate with him” we take this to mean two things: (1) we are NOT to fellowship with them as if they are still in the body of Christ- which involves a give/take relationship centered on Christ (2 Corinthians 6:14-18) and (2) they are NOT to take the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 5:11). In fact, the word for “associate” literally means “to mix up with” and references the idea of keeping intimate, close company with. It is used in the Old Testament (LXX Septuagint) to prohibit intermingling with non-Christians — as in business or in table fellowship.<sup>1</sup> It is in this way that our association is prohibited.<sup>2</sup>

And so far from banishment, we want contact! We want continued involvement in their lives that we might be able to engage them in dialogue. Otherwise we won’t be able to “admonish them as a brother.” Lastly and in closing, notice with me our confidence.

## Our Confidence, Matthew 18:20.

As a final statement in Christ’s description of formal church discipline, the Lord gave a promise.

Matthew 18:20, “For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst.”

What an important reminder. The context is NOT general life, BUT times where we are confronting a brother or sister who has lapsed. At these scary moments we must be reminded that “Christ is especially present,” He guarantees it here!

And so, as difficult as it may be to be a tool in God’s hand to reclaim a rebellious brother or sister, nevertheless we have the confidence in and through it all that Christ is present with us. It is His work we are about. Let us therefore not shrink back. But with humility and great trust, let us endeavor to bear each other’s burdens in love!

## References

MacArthur, J. (1987). *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Galatians*. Chicago: Moody Publishers.

## End Note(s)

<sup>1</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. VII, pp. 852-855.

<sup>2</sup> At this point, advocates of shunning reference 1 Corinthians 5:9-11 which says, “I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I *did* not at all *mean* with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters; for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one.”

Remember at this time that there were many “pleaders with a cause” who went from town to town making money with their mouth. Now on account of the growth of Christianity at the time, many were using the message of Christ to get money. In fact, later when the charlatans became formal, John would warn the body of Christ, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, **do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting**; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds.” (2 John 10-11) It was of these types of people that Paul clearly is referencing here (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:7-8, 18)- not excommunicated Christians. It was these charlatans from whom Paul exhorted for us to stay away.