

The Disciplines of a Good Church

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This is another one of those weeks where I have an exposition of Luke about done and then changed courses. I want to talk about the disciplines of a good church. The disciplines of a good church. Now, the word "discipline" has a broad range of meaning in the English language and in biblical understanding. When some uses the word "disciplined or disciplines" they can be talking about just training and often we use it in the athletic realm as someone is a disciplined trainer to advance themselves. We also use the word "discipline," of course, for punishment and for correction. You also can use the word "disciplined or disciplines" for a rule or a set of rules or a set of methods by which you function or go forward in any kind of procedure.

I was walking this week at my private walking track. Northwest Shoals Community College built me a walking track around their property there. I say it's mine because nobody ever uses it but me and it's just fun. I'm out there by myself. It kind of goes through the woods and I was coming around and there was a car tag there and the car tag had a face, Jesus I'm sure. I haven't seen Jesus' face so I don't know. When I see these pictures of Jesus, I don't know if it's him or not because we haven't seen Jesus. I'm not big on pictures of Jesus but that's not what I'm talking about right now. His face was there and there was a crown of thorns and tears coming down his face and it had underneath his face, "Still saving." That blessed me. I said, "Yes, he is still saving." Then as a pastor who cares about the truth, you see, it's not just enough to have warm fuzzy feelings about Jesus, you need to know the truth about Jesus. The next question came to my mind walking was, "Still saving from what?" We don't want to have the concept of the new pop psychology Jesus that is the theology of Joel Osteen and different degrees and measure much the theology that's crept into a lot of so-called conservative evangelical churches, that Jesus saves you from life's problems, and Jesus saves you from life's disappointments, and Jesus saves you from life's fears. Now, indeed, if you come to Christ, he may do that but also he says, "If you come to me you carry a cross." So he may create new problems and challenges and difficulties. So we've got to be careful that we don't wrap up this Jesus in a package that suits fallen human emotion. Let him be the Jesus the word teaches him to be. In fact, Jesus saves foundationally and primarily from the wrath to come. That's what he saves from. There is an impending wrath from a holy God against all sinners and Jesus saves us from that just wrath that is to come.

But in an amplified way, the Bible tells you that there is more in the salvation package than just missing the wrath of God, though that's foundational. Jesus also is saving a people. He's not just saving individuals. You understand that overwhelmingly when the Bible instructs, it instructs us as a people, a group, a community of believers called local churches. It's impossible to grasp and understand Christianity if you don't understand the interdependent reciprocal connection God saved you to have with other Christians. At one time, you were independent and separate; you had no union; no spiritual connection to the people of God. You've been saved from that isolationism and saved to be a part of a people, a people that truly now know him; a people that truly are beginning to love him; and a people who are truly passionate about glorifying him for both time and eternity. Ephesians 3:21, "to Him be the glory in the church," that's the people, that collection of people, both now and forever and ever, the verse says. So this collectivity of people, the church, is going to be God's organized group of his people both for time and for all eternity.

Now, when you think about Western civilization, Western civilization has an emphasis on what you call rugged individualism and, by the way, there are some virtues in that. There is goodness in a person looking to their own selves and supplying their own needs and not living off the charities or donations of others. By the way, we're losing some of that. So there's goodness in that, but also if one isn't careful, if they don't wash the rugged individualism of Western culture in the truth of Scripture, there can be a lot of error in that. As a matter of fact, rugged individualism can be very antichristian because God saved you from being an island. In Christianity, no man is an island. He saved us to belong to and, by the way, we ought to change our vocabulary about church. Church is not where you attend; church is not where you go. Church is an entity, a body, you belong to. That's the biblical understanding.

So God saved you from that isolation of not being a part of the people of God, but also he saved you from other false communities as far as finding one's core purpose and belonging with any other group. As a matter of fact, the word "church" in the Bible means "called out ones." You're called out from other groups or organizations being your primary belonging place and you're called out from those to make the local church your new primary place of belonging and identity in this world. It's not wrong to be a part of other groups, but they are not the main entity you are connected with and you would not let any other organization, group, community, in any way compete with or diminish your passion and your work for God in and through your local church, the community of God's people.

So I'm saying all that as a foundation stone to say that we are saved to be this community of people. Now, what we want to be now as this local church community is a people who is passionate for his glory, passionate to grow that as we're serving for his glory, we are functioning for our own good and we want to do this following his means. What are his prescribed means whereby for time we can be the truest people of God called out group that we can possibly be until we're all glorified when we get to heaven? Well, to do that we need disciplines, the disciplines of a good church.

Now, let me give you some primary disciplines of true or good local church and, of course, this ties in wonderfully with taking the Lord's Table because when we take the Lord's Supper, we are communing with each other and with our God as his called out unique people so this is a good exhortation for our day. I'm going to give you four disciplines. I don't think you'll find these in any church policy manual or any systematic theology. I just put them down as I believe the Lord gave them to me and they can be organized in other ways but I do think this is an effective biblical organization of the disciplines of a good church, however, I would never say in 20 minutes of speaking to you this morning, this is exhaustive. There are always other things that we could add but these are some foundational things.

Number 1: There is to be formative discipline in the church. Formative discipline. Paul said in Galatians 4:19 to the church there in Galatia, "My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you." Now, the word "labor" there means "childbirth." Paul says, "I am striving and straining with all that is in me so that you as a church family have Christ formed in you. You are individually like Christ but corporately you are a body that looks like Jesus." Don't you want that for Grace Life Shoals? That as a body we look like Jesus? Now, he uses the word "formed." "I'm in labor with you until Christ is formed in you." It's morpho is the word. The English word "metamorphosis" comes from it. It means to morph you or fashion you into a new thing; to adjust us to fit a new pattern. So we need to be forming. We have the formative discipline of the church.

Now, the primary means I would organize in two ways: 1. the ministry of the word; and the other would be Christian fellowship. Of course, in the ministry of the word, foundationally it's the preaching of the word; the teaching of the word of God. As individuals, we're involved in reading but often our reading is within the fellowship of the community of small groups. Of course, studying the word of God. Memorizing and meditating on the word of God. All of these things we do in concert with each other as this is a part of the formative discipline of God's church.

But also fellowshiping in the church and primarily in small groups as a way God forms us and adjusts the parts and makes us more fitting to the new pattern that is our goal and our passion which is Jesus Christ.

The ordinances of the church. When we partake of these ordinances, there is a grace that works in our hearts as we partake of the Lord's Table that helps us to realign ourselves with him as our head, as our Lord. It helps us to refocus our passions and our emotions on the treasure of Christ's death for us and it helps us to refocus our hope on the return of Christ when we will one day be with him forever and ever and we will share the cup with him finally in his kingdom. So the ordinances of the church are formative; they help form us and shape us.

But also think about the thousands of times and that's the number that would come to me, the thousands of times just fellowshiping with brothers in the church. A brother, for example, may say how he struggled in an area, then he read a truth in the Bible and it gave him insight and he had no idea in that little 90 second statement he was helping me.

I learn from his experience. He quoted a verse that helped me and how many ways we're forming each other as the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So one of the key and foundational disciplines of the church is formative discipline. Now, secondly, there is corrective discipline. The Scripture teaches very clearly of this. Corrective in the sense of being sharpened or fashioned again. Now, corrective discipline is a continual thing. You don't just get corrected and it's done. Well, when you get to heaven you're corrected finally and it's done, but down here it's a progression. We call it progressive sanctification. Proverbs 12:1 says, "Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge," and there it means the discipline of being corrected. If you've got any knowledge, if you've got any real understanding, you will be grateful for small group class or fellowship of believers where there is some correction that goes on from time to time. We know we all need that. We're unfinished products. Proverbs 15:10 says, "He who hates reproof will die." If you have a resistance to being shown where you could do better, being shown where you may have a blind spot. I hope that you're like your pastor, I have had times when a blind spot of thinking or even behavior was in my life and boom, God shined the light on it. That's what reproof means. And it was a powerful reproof but that's so I can adjust myself, repent and adjust myself to stay on the path of obedience to God's truth which is the path of life because the wages of sin is death. So it's a blessing; an unequivocal, if you will, blessing to have correction so that we can stay on the paths of life. Proverbs 29:15, "The rod and the reproof give wisdom." Corrections that come through reproofs help us to gain and grow in wisdom.

There are so many times in our Christian walk when a brother or a sister in Christ may need to lovingly, humbly and absolutely always in confidentiality, give you a correction and we should rejoice in those. You may say sometimes, "Well, that person's got this, this and this wrong. And that person isn't doing right here, here and here." That might be right, but God used Balaam's donkey to correct someone so don't get too hung up on the vessel God's used, get focused on how you're going to be helped by the correction. So in church life, ongoing all the time, the preaching of the word, there is corrective discipline going on.

That was number 2. Number 3: punitive discipline. Now, this is much more rare because overwhelmingly people who know Christ are humble and they're willing to say, "I need to do better. Thank you for showing me that. I need to walk more truly. I need to change my thinking there. I've got an issue there and thank you for pointing that out." Then it's over and it's a done thing. But sometimes someone is not repentant and so there the Scripture teaches there is to be punitive discipline. Now, the word "punitive" means "to inflict punishment," and the word "to punish" has the idea of "imposing a penalty." There are those who would teach that the church is never to have any part of punishment or imposing a penalty. They just don't know their Bibles. We never have that as our motive alone, never alone, but that is a part of having proper biblical disciplines in the church.

Look over to Matthew, if you will, Matthew 18. Let's all turn there for just a moment and Matthew 18 gives us that outline of punitive discipline within the church. Look at Matthew 18, and first of all we see there is the punitive discipline of shaming an

unrepentant brother. Of shaming an unrepentant brother. Let me just start in Matthew 18:15 to get the context. He says, "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private," amen? Show him his fault in private. Don't talk about him to a group. You go to him alone. If you talk about him in a group, then you're an object of church discipline. Private, "if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you," he didn't repent; he didn't get right, "take two more witnesses with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed." Now you've got two or three people who are trying to, in effect, bring him to shame; bring him to see that this is something that he ought to turn from. Now, notice what else, verse 17, "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church." So what's the point of telling it to the broader group? It's to bring a shame so that they will "feel ashamed and want to turn from their lack of repentance and turn back to God and turn back to faithfulness."

Now, after shaming, if that does not work, then he gives the next stage here and that's removal. They are to be removed if they continue on and they do not have a humble or repentant spirit. He says in the last part of chapter 18, verse 17, "if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Now, in a Jewish oriented audience, a Gentile or a tax collector was somebody you did not associate with. You separated yourself from their fellowship.

So those that might argue there is never to be a punitive aspect in church discipline are missing the balance. There never is a punitive aspect alone because even in the punitive stage with an unrepentant brother or sister, our goal is restoration, but that's not to mean there is not a punishment element in the process of hoping for restoration. Actually, there's always both.

Some cross references here that I think reinforce this very well. 1 Corinthians 4:21, he talks to this renegade church in Corinth and this is Paul acting as their pastor and he says, "What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod," I don't know about you but the last time somebody got after me with a rod, it was punishing, and that's the figure of speech. He's not literally going to...well, I don't know, he might, but I don't think Paul is talking about a literal rod. He's using a figure of speech. "I come to you with a pastoral punishing or punitive discipline or are you going to get right and get humble so that I can come to you with love and a spirit of gentleness?" By the way, once there is repentance, the rod is laid down and gentleness is now the MO of our approach to them.

1 Corinthians 4:18, "Now some have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you." Now, that's the reason for the rod he just mentioned previously. He said, "The reason why I may bring a rod of punitive discipline is because you're arrogant and won't humble yourselves under the truth of the word of God."

Now 2 Corinthians 2:6-7, "Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority, so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him, otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." So notice the word that is used here "punishment." He said, "You as a church family voted and you extended a punished, a disciplined punishment against this man in the church." Now, this

was the young man who had been openly living in sexual immorality and was laughing about it, even proud of it and brash about it, and was not repentant so the church did what they can do. Now, we are not like the state churches of old Europe that, I think, violated Scripture by exercising state authority to imprison people and even put people to death. I believe that was a grave unbiblical error for the church to ever unite itself with governing authorities. That is not the punishment we inflict. The only punishment we can inflict is shunning and removing. Period. That's the biblical stance. All other punishments are given over to the civil magistrates, the governing authorities, and they are the servants of God, the Scripture says, to bear out those civil justice matters. Now, the word "punishment" that Paul used here when he talked about the church rendering a disciplined punishment means "to mete out what is due; to bring forth actions that are appropriate based on the behavior of that individual."

So in the disciplines of a good church, there is formative disciplines. That's happening all the time, mainly under the word and in Christian fellowship. There are corrective disciplines and those are intertwined with formative disciplines as we are constantly being called out and exposed by the word of God for thoughts, attitudes, motives, behaviors, whatever that we need to correct and if you get corrected every week under the word of God, that's good news that you're God's. The Spirit of God is taking the word of God and he's the sword, the word's the sword of the Spirit. He takes the word and he cuts you so that he can help heal you and keep you on the path of life. In those rare cases where there is known and willful sin and a person refuses to humble themselves and even try, then the church is required by authority of Scripture to begin to exhibit a punitive discipline, but hallelujah, it's never to be ending there. Lastly, number 4: there is a restorative discipline in the church. A restorative discipline. Galatians 6:1 tell us, "if any man is caught in a trespass, let you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness." Isn't that sweet and beautiful? And do it in the sense of considering yourself, remembering yourself.

Now, in the restorative discipline process, four things come to mind. 1. You're working with this person to establish that they have experienced genuine repentance. That's the first sub point: is there genuine repentance. Now, the Bible has a lot to say about there is a false or a worldly sorrow that's not a true repentance, but there is a true godly sorrow that is a true repentance and it's really, if you counsel with people a long time about sin and repentance, it gets quite clear. Here's one of the ways you know: a truly repentant person increasingly is passionate about the honor and glory of Jesus Christ, not the consequence their sin caused them. It gets real clear when you deal with that. 2 Corinthians 7:8-9, Paul says, "For though I caused you sorrow by my letter," now, what he's saying here is, "I wrote you a letter rebuking you and it upset a bunch of you. It made you sorrowful." He said, "I do not regret it; though I did regret it." He's kind of talking like a parent, "I had to do what I did in disciplining you and it broke my heart to do it, but I'm glad I did it, though I wish I didn't do it." Just like a parent. "For I see that that letter caused you sorrow, though only for a while bit I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance." So the crocodile tears and the sorrow isn't necessarily repentance. Paul said though, "Your sorrow led to a true biblically defined repentance."

I told you before about standing, I think I was standing right here and a man got up out of the aisle and ran down the aisle weeping crocodile tears proclaiming he was a tare in the kingdom of God, he was not saved, wanted to be saved. We led him in a prayer. We baptized him in the baptistry. Two weeks later, he leaves his wife for another woman and never seen him again. He had sorrow but not sorrow that led to repentance because sorrow that leads to repentance will have some fruits. Never perfect but some fruits that look like their heart is repentant.

Remember when John the Baptist was baptizing and the religious authorities began coming down there because they wanted to get in on the popularity of it. You've got to watch it when you plant churches because a lot of people just go in because they think they can get a foothold and be a leader in a new thing because they didn't have character to make it in the old thing. So these Pharisees are coming, running to this new thing. John the Baptist has got all these people thronging around him and John stops them and says, "Hold on a second, before you guys come and are baptized of me, you bring forth some fruit in keeping with repentance." In other words, you've got a track record. We need to see something.

So in restorative discipline, there is a time of seeking to find out, "Is this genuine repentance?" Now, sometimes it's real quick and easy because it's just very obvious. Sometimes it may take a while. Secondly, there should be restitution to any and all that were wronged by their sin or wrongdoing. Old Zaccheus, the tax collector, you know, tax collectors in this day had the authority of the Roman government behind them and they could really take advantage of the people, basically stole from the people and robbed the people in an unjust way. So Zaccheus gets saved and he tells the Lord, "If I have defrauded anybody or wronged anybody in the way I've collected taxes or the amount I've collected, I'll pay everybody back four times as much." Now, I'm not saying the Bible requires four times restitution, I'm saying it's the heart to want to make it right that is clear when somebody has true repentance in their lives.

Thirdly, there should be a full and genuine earnestness to meet all the requirements of civil justice in any case. If there is a need for the civil authorities to be involved, then the repentant Christian will humbly and genuinely say, "Whatever it is, I'll receive the punishment." Romans 13, we don't have time to turn there but Romans 13 teaches that God has ordained secular governments to reward those who do good and to punish those who do evil and that they are the servant or minister of God to handle those things.

Lastly, there should be the genuine desire to repair the honor of Christ. You see, when a person sins, it's never them sinning. Whatever you do, you reflect on every one of the rest of us. It's impossible not to. Grace Life as a body of believers is reflected on anything and everything one individual member does or doesn't do and so Christ's honor and reputation is always hurt when in a public way we have sinned and we should have, if we're repentant ones, that heart attitude that says, "Whatever it takes, I want to repair Christ's reputation." 2 Samuel 12:13-14, Nathan has come in and confronted King David about his wickedness of taking another man's wife and then having the woman's husband

murdered to cover his sin and Nathan confronts him about it and David is broken. David says, "I have sinned." Now notice what he says there, the middle of the verse there, "The LORD also has taken away your sin; you shall not die. However, because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also that is born to you shall surely die." In other words, God is very concerned that you've hurt his reputation publicly in what you've done and what you've been doing.

Now, when we're in this restoration process if we're dealing with a brother or a sister and we see these things are there and they are repentant, then the key is Galatians 6:1, that we go to that person in a spirit of gentleness and restore that person, each one looking to yourselves. That means we restore them looking at ourselves that we are not haughty and we are not proud and we are not assuming that we're above falling into sin. Amen? We consider ourselves. So it has been true in every discipline case I have been involved in that along the way I thought, "Lord, I want to be disciplined." I have so many struggles and I have so many weaknesses. Now, there may not be a public scandal connected to them but God knows my heart, amen? And I think that's part of what Paul is saying when he says, "consider yourselves." It's no place for arrogance or pride or demeaning spirit when somebody has humbled themselves and in the process of restorative discipline. 2 Corinthians 2:6-7 as this boy who was in want and public immorality has repented and gotten right, Paul writes to them and says again, "Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority," now listen to this, "so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him." Now that he's repented, you've moved from punitive discipline to now restorative discipline and your heart should be forgiveness and comfort otherwise he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Then verse 8, he says, "Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him."

Well, those are four disciplines of a good church: formative discipline, corrective discipline, if necessary punitive discipline, and glory to God, restorative discipline.