



Church Discipline – For Our Good and For His Glory

Selected Scriptures

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Beloved, I am going to say something that you already know, but of which to you need to be reminded. Seeking to be a faithful church in the midst of a spiritually anemic culture is many times very difficult – but it is right and it is good and it is pleasing to God. To follow Scripture and to place the glory of God and the honor of Christ foremost in the church is foreign in our day. The majority of churches in our day, not all, let me say that again, not all, -- but most -- have a small view of God and His Glory, and exalted view of man and his desires, an imbalanced view of grace, and a shrunken view of the calling of God to be holy and to live in a distinctly different and gospel-shaped way. To be a faithful church in this era of spiritual anemia is very difficult. It requires of us fortitude and endurance, unwavering trust in the Lord and the authority of His word, and an unwavering commitment to faithfulness to the Lord. It will make us very different from most churches we know. But our measure, our standard, is not other churches. It is, and can ever only be, Christ and His Word. Our measure is Christ.

For that reason, in light of the disciplinary action that we need to take this morning, I thought it best to instruct you from the Word of God regarding the reasons, the heart, and the purpose of church discipline. I want teach you, from the Word of God, the heart and reason for following Scripture rather than our human wisdom when it comes to this difficult aspect of church life. I trust that you have been preparing your heart in prayer to receive this instruction with a desire to submit your mind and emotions to the Lord. I want to start by first reminding you of who we are and of whose we are.

Who and Whose We Are

When we gather here to worship as West Salem Baptist Church, we are confessing some very important things that I want you to think about. When we gather to worship, we are confessing that we are the people of God and that Christ is our Lord and King. When we gather to worship we are declaring that God, out of His steadfast and faithful love, has chosen us in Christ to be His people before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before Him. We are declaring that He has pursued us and has saved us from the wrath that we deserve by the life and death of Christ on our behalf, that we have received redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our sins and that we have been clothed in the righteousness of Christ. We are declaring that by the grace of God in Christ we have been saved through faith, and not by our own works or anything that we have done, but simply by the gift of God so that none of us can boast. He is the one who deserves all the praise and all of the credit for our salvation. When we gather as the people of God, we are declaring that our lives are not our own, to be lived however our flesh may desire, but that we have been purchased by Christ as His own possession, and our minds, our hearts, and our wills rightly belong to Him.

We are confessing that Christ is our King and we are members in His kingdom, a colony of heaven on earth whose end is to represent Christ and His gospel in this world. He rules us by His word, He rules us by His Spirit, and we come to give to Him the worship of which He is worthy and to celebrate His mighty act of redemption on the cross and to bow before Him in humility. We come to have our minds renewed by the Word of God so that we might become mature in Christ, and adorn the Word of God with an obedient and Christ-like life. When we gather to worship, we are declaring that our desire is to honor Christ and to live as His people according to His Word so that this fellowship would be pleasing in His sight and so that the holiness and worthiness of Christ, the transforming power of His gospel, would be made known in this world through us as we are salt and light in the world.

We come here confessing that Christ is worthy of our lives laid down before Him, our desires and emotions laid down before Him, of our minds and our wills laid down before Him. We come declaring that Christ is Lord and we are His people, the sheep of His pasture, and that He rightly has all authority over our lives, and more than we are anything else we are followers and worshippers of Christ. We come expressing a commitment to obeying the commands of His Word. We declare that His holiness, His wisdom, His worth, His glory, His majesty, His kingdom, His gospel, His truth, far exceed in value anything else in all of this world. He is Creator, Lawgiver, Redeemer, and Judge and our lives must be lived in light of Who He is. There is more, no doubt, but we, at least, declare these things – or we should.

This, in part, is what it means to be the church, to be the people of God, to be His kingdom citizens.

And with this confession comes a great responsibility. ***“As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.” (1 Peter 1:14–21, ESV)*** Having saved us, God commands that we would be obedient to Him, to be holy as He is holy – that is, to live lives that are in accordance with His commands and His character. Not that we will be perfect and never sin, but that when we do sin, we would own it, confess it and repent of it and seek to live blamelessly. As those redeemed and called out of the world and called together as the church, God commands us to conduct our lives in reverent awe, serving Him with an undivided heart, trembling at His greatness and power, filled with wonder at His works, humbled by His greatness. That is a high calling to be sure. And one of the methods that God employs in order to enable us to live in this manner is discipline.

God’s Discipline – Formative and Corrective

Now when we hear the word discipline, our first response is negative, right? We think of discipline as a negative thing. But it isn’t. It’s necessary and it’s good. It’s necessary because none of us is a finished product, are we? And it is good because God is committed to fashioning us after the image of Christ. ***“Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.” (1 Thessalonians 5:23–24, ESV)*** Broadly speaking, *discipline* is everything that God does, through His means of grace, to enable His people to pursue holiness and be formed into the image of Christ.

We need to be shaped and molded by God so that the old ways, our sinful inclinations, will be subdued and the character and blessing of Christ-likeness will take root. There are two kinds of discipline that God employs for that purpose – formative discipline and corrective discipline. Formative discipline includes all of the ways that God uses to lead people to maturity in Christ through positive instruction and teaching. When we hear the Word preached and our minds are renewed, when we are convicted of sin and repent, when we see proper Christian living modeled for us, when we are exhorted and encouraged by other Christians; that is formative discipline. Let me just give you some examples of what I mean: **“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...”** (Ephesians 4:11–15, ESV)

“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” (Hebrews 10:24–25, ESV)

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” (Colossians 3:16–17, ESV)

These are all the ways that we both experience and participate with God in formative discipline. God is the main actor and we participate in the work of formative discipline. Formative discipline is like braces on teeth, or the stick that helps the tree grow straight, or the continued admonitions to chew with your mouth closed. This is formative discipline.

But when formative discipline is rejected, corrective discipline must be applied. Corrective discipline is the correcting of sin in a believer’s life and God, as a faithful Father, is committed to that as well. Hebrews 12 is the classic text in that regard. Look at it with me: **“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,**

looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1–2, ESV) God’s purpose for us is that we would lay aside sin, that is put sin away in our lives, and run the race faithfully, looking to Christ for the strength and grace to do so and as our example. Then the writer of Hebrews goes on saying:

“Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” (Hebrews 12:3–11, ESV) He explains to us the deadly seriousness of fighting against sin, using the metaphor of “shedding our blood.” This is serious. And if we continue in sin, the promise is that God will discipline us. How God does that is up to Him. There are many ways we see in Scripture – the loss of joy, loss of peace, removal of His blessings, illness, specific trials, the removal of His fellowship, the removal of His Word, the removal from the body of Christ – there are a lot of things that God uses.

But here are the key points that we don’t want to miss. He disciplines us: 1) Because He is our Father and He loves us. 2) If He does not discipline us it is because we do not belong to Him. 3) He does this so that we can share in His holiness, in His character and by extension, His fellowship and joy. 4) He disciplines us in ways that are painful so that we learn afresh the harshness and death-dealing of sin and so that we will enjoy the fruit of righteousness, the peace that comes with walking in accordance with His will, and 5) that we will desire righteousness and not sin. Then He says:

“Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”

(Hebrews 12:12–14, ESV) In other words, the goal of discipline is not our destruction, but that we would be healed, that we would be at peace with one another, and that we would be holy, for without holiness we will not see God. Corrective discipline is for our good and springs from God’s love for us.

Now, the natural temptation for us would be to say, “If God has committed Himself to disciplining His children, then we should have nothing to do with it. That’s God’s job.” But beloved, that is a tragic misunderstanding of the way in which God works and of our mutual responsibility to be faithful to God and to care for one another’s souls. Just as we have roles and responsibilities to fulfill when it comes to formative discipline, we have a responsibility for corrective discipline as well.

As a church, we must engage not only in formative discipline but also in corrective discipline if we are to be faithful to our calling as God’s people. Jesus clearly committed this responsibility to us in Matthew 18. There He gives us a framework of how we should deal with sin in the body, interpersonal sin and sins against the body as a whole. There he says: ***““If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 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 collector.”*** (Matthew 18:15–17, ESV)

Christ knows that the gathering of the church will not be without sin. He expects that there will be sin to be dealt with among His people and He expects us to deal with it in a right manner. In the case of a serious or persistent sin, we are to go to our brother, identify the sin, and call that brother or sister to repentance. The goal is always to gain the brother back. The motive is love and the spiritual well-being of the person. Now that does not mean that every single sin needs to be confronted. ***“Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.”*** (Proverbs 19:11, ESV) ***“Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.”*** (1 Peter 4:8, ESV) But if it is a sin that is damaging your fellowship, that is a threat to the unity of the body, that is bringing reproach on the gospel, or damaging the testimony of the church, it has to be addressed.

If the brother or sister is unrepentant, you take a couple of witnesses, and if the brother or sister is still unrepentant, you take the issue to the church – to the elders first and eventually to the body. If at any point the person repents and bears the marks of true repentance, the process is over. You extend forgiveness and you seek to be fully reconciled. If not, then Jesus says some pretty strong words – you treat that person as a Gentile – as someone outside of the covenant of grace – and as a tax-collector – as one who removed themselves from the covenant people of God by their own choice, as the Jewish tax collectors who chose allegiance with Rome over allegiance with the people of God. You withdraw fellowship, you withdraw familiarity, and you’re interaction with them must be limited to calling them to repentance. You remain gracious and kind, but you cannot continue in the same sort of free and full fellowship with them. That seems unloving, but it isn’t. The hope is that in losing the fellowship of the saints, that sinning brother or sister will be moved to repentance for the good of their soul.

And take note of what He says in the rest of the text: **“Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”** (Matthew 18:18–20, ESV) In other words, Jesus is saying that in doing this, you are acting as my agent and I am with you as you engage in this corrective discipline.

But this is not the only place that we read these sorts of commands in the NT. Let me show you just a few texts. **“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 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. I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at**

all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?” (1 Corinthians 5:1–12, ESV)

Now why does Paul say such things? Is it because he is heavy-handed? Is it because he is hateful? Not at all. He said these things because this man, and those like him are deeply deceived. He thought He could claim faithfulness to Christ, he thought he could profess faith in Christ, while deliberately disobeying the Lord. Paul says such a person is deluded, and that to really love that person and to glorify and honor God as the church, you need to show him the falsity of his profession of faith in the light of the way that he is living. And, in order to love the church, you must protect it from the spreading and destructive influence of sin. It will spread if it is not dealt with in a Scriptural manner.

Consider 2 Thessalonians 3. Here Paul is dealing with people who were lazy and who were out of step with the will and word of God – that’s what the word idle means. ***“Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.”*** (2 Thessalonians 3:6–15, ESV)

In Titus, he deals with the person who stirs up strife and division in the people of God. ***“As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more***

to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.”
(Titus 3:10–11, ESV)

Paul deals with those who spread false doctrine in the church. ***“I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.”***
(Romans 16:17–18, ESV)

These are not the only texts that talk about church discipline, but they are a good representative. We can never doubt the deep interest that Jesus has that his church would be pure, since ***“Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”*** (Ephesians 5:25–27, ESV) These commands are given for a reason – there are times corrective discipline must be carried out, especially in the godlessness of the last days inside the church, as described by 2 Timothy 3. God demands a holy and pure people. And He has given us His Word for this purpose. However, as we can see, the overarching standard is the Word of God. The basis for discipline must always be the Word of God, not our feelings, not our wisdom, not our preferences, but the Word of God. ***“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”*** (2 Timothy 3:16–17, ESV)

We should always prefer formative discipline, but when it become necessary, we cannot ignore or avoid the command to carry out corrective discipline, even if it leads to the dis-fellowshipping of someone. The soul of that person and the glory of God as revealed in a holy people are at stake. I want to close this morning with some principles of church discipline that we need to keep in mind.

Principles Regarding Corrective Church Discipline

1) The purpose of church discipline is to the spiritual restoration of fallen members and the consequent strengthening of the church and glorifying of the Lord. The goal of church discipline is not to throw people out of the church or to exercise authority in a heavy-handed way. It is to restore a sinning believer to holiness and to bring him or her back into a right relationship with Christ and with His body. Rebuking and even dis-fellowshipping is done with the hope that there would be true repentance so that we can enjoy again the blessing of true fellowship.

2) Church discipline undergirds and strengthens the ministry of the Word of God. The desire of the Apostle Paul is captured in 2 Cor. 11:2 when he says: ***“For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.”*** (2 Corinthians 11:2, ESV) This was one of the great goals of his ministry. If we say that we believe the testimony of the Word of God that sin is to be put to death in us but we do nothing to deal with persistent and serious sin in the church of Christ, then we send the message that there is no real need for our belief to match our conduct. When we fail to faithfully and lovingly confront sin on a personal level, the authoritative nature of the Word of God is eroded, God’s Holiness and Glory are trampled, and the people of God are led to believe that preaching can be divorced from living. Ultimately, this kind of thinking leads to the ruination of the church.

3) Church discipline has the effect of deepening the church’s commitment to holy and righteous living. When the church takes this seriously, the very commitment to church discipline will lead to the prompting of self-examination and of repentance from sin by displaying the consequences of remaining in sin, the destructiveness of persisting in sin, rather than repenting and pursuing righteousness.

4) Church discipline reinforces the true nature of body life. We are members one of another. When one of us remains in unrepentant sin, it affects all of us. Accountability and confrontation, when necessary, affirms the importance of the fact that we ***“though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”*** (Romans 12:5, ESV)

5) Church discipline is not unloving, it is the very opposite. The basis of all discipline is the holiness and love of God. We believe that by obeying Christ in church discipline, we are loving our neighbor as ourselves. To ignore sin may appear to be kind and caring but in fact truly demonstrates a lack of care for our brother in Christ. For the church of the Lord Jesus

Christ to be disobedient to the clear teachings of God's Word on the pretense that is unloving is to love without understanding. Paul prayed for the Philippians that their love might **"abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment," (Philippians 1:9, ESV)** We must not define love according to our imperfect mind and affections and look to the clear teachings of the Word of God for a proper definition of love in respect to a willfully sinning brother. In church discipline we are trusting that the Lord knows better than we what it means to truly love.

The most harmful and fatal thing to man is sin. To fail to practice proper church discipline with a person who has made it his intention to continue in sin is a failure to act biblically and with real concern for his or her soul. Lack of church discipline is not loving concern, but an indifference to the spiritual welfare of the person sinning, indifference to the honor of Christ, and indifference to the welfare of the flock.

6) Church discipline does not set an impossibly high standard of perfection in order to be a member of the church. Without question, we are all sinners. But there is a difference between a repentant sinner, contrite in heart and humble in spirit, and one who does not acknowledge sin, or refuses to repent and remaining in determined rebellion, or does not combat sin and seek to kill it daily.

7) The practice of church discipline is not a judicial sentence on a person's salvation. That is not the place of the church. The church does not condemn anybody. Such a pronouncement is not our role. In discipline, the church expresses divine disapproval upon and the removal of fellowship from those who bring this judgment upon themselves by persisting in open sin without repentance. The avenue of repentance and restoration is always and lovingly open to anyone who repents and seeks reconciliation. But open sin and the profession of Christ as Lord are a soul-imperiling contradiction.

8) Church discipline is for good. It is for the good of the one being disciplined so that they may come to repentance. It is for the good of other Christians so that they see the danger of sin. It is for the good of the health of the church as a whole to protect it from the spread of sin. It is for the good of the corporate witness and power of the gospel testimony of the church. And it is for the good of the display of the glory of God as we reflect his holiness. 1

Peter 2:9-12 says: ***“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. 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 2:9–12, ESV)

As we see from the texts that we have mentioned this morning, the church is operating in obedience to Jesus Christ when it carries out the ministry of discipline. We are being obedient to Christ when we are faithful to carry out this ministry in the love and grace of God. It will not be easy for us to be faithful in this matter of church discipline when so many churches are unfaithful in this regard. But our measure, our standard, is not other churches. It is, and can ever only be, Christ and His Word. Our measure is Christ. And our goal is that God would be glorified among the people whom He has saved by His mighty grace to share in His holiness and righteousness.

Let me close with these words from Mark Dever’s book, ***Nine Marks of a Healthy Church***: John Dagg wrote that, “When discipline leaves the church, so does Christ.” We need to live lives that back up our professions 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 different than what 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 whom our witness affects; 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 a tremendous privilege and a great responsibility.

No church has a choice about obeying Christ, therefore our church must practice church discipline. Obedience to God in this regard upholds the glory of God, His right to rule, the value of His Word, and the worth of salvation and His Lordship.

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