

ECCLESIOLOGY
THE LOCAL CHURCH
Lesson 17

Church Discipline

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The three most important tasks of the local church are:
 - 1. Faithful proclaiming of the Word.
 - 2. Faithful administration of the sacraments.
 - 3. Faith exercising of discipline.
- B. One of the sad lacks in present-day churches is that people no longer look upon church affiliation or membership as a privilege. The average church is run like a social club, and the main concern of most churches is how many people can be added to the membership list. However, the secular social clubs usually exercise some kind of discipline upon their members. So many churches are afraid to exercise discipline for fear they will drive some members away, and then they won't be around to give money to keep the church bills paid.
- C. Some think if elders discipline church members they are not showing them love. This kind of thinking is foolish because there is no such thing as real love without discipline.

II. REASONS AND REMEDIES FOR CHURCH PROBLEMS

- A. Doctrinal error (Rom. 16:17-18). False teaching enters a congregation very subtly and false teachers are usually very likable people with flattering words. Remedy: Watch out for them and keep away from them. If there is heresy involved, the heretic is to be rejected (Tit. 3:10) after several warnings. NOTE: This false teaching is over primary doctrines, not secondary issues.
- B. Insubordinate spirit (1 Thess. 5:14). The NIV has "idle" but a better translation is "unruly" or "undisciplined" (NASB). This is a military word which speaks of an insubordinate spirit, which could be anything from a rebellious spirit to a critical, harsh, negative spirit.
- C. Laziness and gossip (2 Thess. 3:6-15). Christians who are idle and will not work are to be disciplined by the local church. Also "busybodies" and gossips are to be disciplined. Remedy: Keep away from such people; do not associate with them, but regard them as a brother and not an enemy.
- D. False teaching on holiness (1 Tim. 6:1-5). The Bible teaches Christian workers (slaves) are to be in submission to management (slave-masters). If any person teaches otherwise, he is not teaching the practical doctrine of godliness.

- E. Immoral conduct (1 Cor. 5:1-13). The context is about a professing Christian who was guilty of incest (probably sexual relation with his mother or stepmother). The Corinthian Church was told to discipline this man for his actions. Remedy: Must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother and is guilty of sexual immorality, greed, idolatry, slander, drunkenness or a swindler. They are to put this man out of the fellowship and not eat with him. (2 Thess. 3:14). NOTE: Such drastic action may cause this person to repent.

III. STEPS IN THE DISCIPLINE PROCESS

- A. Confrontation (Matt. 18:15). Go to the person directly, not to anyone else.
- B. Admonition (Matt. 18:16). If step one fails, take two or three witnesses. These witnesses may be elders or some mature Christians. The person is to be admonished and brought to repentance if possible. NOTE: At this point the elders do all they can to restore this brother to fellowship. This process may last for a long time. Every conceivable thing should be done before taking the final step of excommunication. The person may be suspended from the Lord's Table or taken out of teaching positions or leadership.
- C. Excommunication. If the admonition of the elders is not heeded, then it must be brought before the whole local church (Matt. 18:17a). The church is to be informed of the person's sin and he is to be publicly excommunicated from the local church (Matt. 18:17b) and taken off the church roll.
1. It is at this point that the erring brother is turned over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh (1 Cor. 5:5) and is treated as an unsaved man (Matt. 18:19b).
 2. The person may come to the services of the church like any other unsaved man if he wishes to hear God's Word.
 3. The goal of excommunication is always to see the person repent and come back to fellowship with Christ and the church.
- D. Separation. In some extreme cases, the excommunicated person may be cut off totally from any communication with the church (2 Thess. 3:6, 14). It may even go to the point of not speaking to the person (2 John 9-11). NOTE: This stern measure of discipline, administered in love, will cause the wayward believer to see the seriousness of sin in his life and turn from it because he longs for fellowship with the brethren.
- E. Restoration. Discipline is always towards repentance and restoration of the one who has sinned (2 Cor. 2:5-11). When the sinning brother does repent, then the congregation must be willing to accept this brother back into fellowship. If God has forgiven the brother, then surely Christians should do the same.

IV. BASIC THOUGHTS ON DISCIPLINE

- A. Elders must be willing to carry out discipline.
- B. Christians are to judge doctrine (Tit. 3:10) and morals (1 Cor. 5:13) but not motives (Matt. 7:1-5).

- C. The congregation must cooperate with the elders to have effective discipline.
- D. The church which does not exercise church discipline will never be truly effective because sin (in whatever form) will destroy the unity of the body.
- E. The problem with discipline today is that if a person is disciplined, he just goes to another church, which takes him right in with no questions asked.

V. WHY DISCIPLINE?

- A. To glorify God.
- B. To purify the church.
- C. To warn Christians about the seriousness of sin.
- D. To reclaim the disobedient Christian.

VI. TURNING THE UNREPENTANT CHRISTIAN OVER TO SATAN 1 Cor. 5:3-5 (NASB)

- A. Paul's judgment: "For I, on my part, though not present in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has committed this, as though I were present."
 1. The Apostle Paul examined all the facts from the reports he received and found the man guilty. Paul was at this time in Ephesus but made a sound judgment by the power of the Holy Spirit and his apostolic office.
 2. Paul made a judgment and the Corinthians were to comply with the Apostle's declaration by carrying out the discipline on this man. Notice carefully this man's fate was not left in the hands of a congregation's whims. Paul told them what they were to do, and they were to do it.
 3. Today when elders exercise discipline, they are not to do whatever they feel is right. Elders have been given specific instructions in the Bible as to how to carry out discipline. Apostolic and Divine authority have already spoken in the area of discipline through the inspired Bible. Therefore, elders are merely to follow through on what the Apostle taught.
- B. Paul's court: "In the name of the Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of the Lord Jesus."
 1. Paul imagines himself in the presence of the Corinthian church conducting church court to discipline the guilty offender. Paul saw the elders taking no action on the offender, so he, present in spirit, presides at the church court. The church court was assembled in the name (authority) of the Lord Jesus Christ. All church discipline is exercised in the authority of Jesus Christ who is the Lord and Head of the Church.
 2. Discipline is not just a group of elders making capricious judgments as human beings. It is action taken in the power and authority of Jesus Christ. Discipline is a serious matter.
 3. An awful responsibility rests on the elders, and they must be careful no to abuse their authority which has been delegated to them by the Lord.
- C. Paul's Decision: "I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan, for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus."

1. Paul made an apostolic disciplinary decision to deliver the offender over to Satan which is the final step in the excommunication process.
2. There are two kingdoms at work in this world: the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of Satan. The kingdom of Christ operates within the sphere the Church and the sphere outside the Church is the kingdom of Satan (1 John 5:19; Col. 1:13). To be put out of the church is to be put into the sphere where Satan controls. In excommunication, the local church in its mind and action is to place the unrepentant offender back under the control of Satan. The offender's persistence in evil demonstrates that he has never really left Satan's kingdom. Therefore, the church is to think of the offender as back under the control of Satan and publicly the church is treat him as an unbeliever. He is, as Jesus said, to be treated like a Gentile, tax collector, and an unregenerate sinner and not to be considered a Christian at all (even though the person may actually be a Christian).
3. Excommunication does not mean a person is not a Christian. It means he is to be treated as though he were not a Christian. Excommunication involves the loss of all Christian privileges. It does not put a person out of the invisible, universal church but out of the visible, local church.
4. Hopefully an unrepentant Christian, while in Satan's realm, will find himself miserable, sensing he cannot live without the fellowship of Christ and His people. A true Christian will truly repent when excommunicated. If a person does not repent, then he simply proves he was never in Christ's kingdom and was always in Satan's kingdom. He proves that his Christian experience was superficial and spurious with absolutely no genuineness to it. In short, he proves he was never saved in the first place.
5. The "destruction of the flesh" probably refers to bodily discipline such as sickness and disease, using Satan as an instrument (Job 1,2; 2 Cor. 12: 7).
6. The goal of this extreme act of excommunication is that the offender's spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus Christ. The goal is not a sadistic glee that a brother has fallen but to see his spirit saved in the day of Jesus Christ. Hopefully he will experience the need for repentance and confession of his sin, so he will be restored to fellowship with Christ and the local church.
7. There is strong evidence that this offender did repent and came back into fellowship with Christ and the church. The discipline worked but then the church had a hard time forgiving the erring brother and letting him back into the church (2 Cor. 2:5-8). NOTE: Not to forgive a repentant Christian is to fall into the devil's schemes (2 Cor. 2:11).