

Church Discipline
2 Thessalonians 3:6-15
May 27, 2001
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The talkative crowd went instantly silent.

The Partners (members) of the church had been called to a special meeting.

Business meetings are fairly common in our church because that is the way we conduct the most important affairs of the church.

But when the chairman announced that the meeting was for the purpose of church discipline, the room went silent.

And as he stated how John had left his wife and family for another woman and refused to return you could feel a kind of nervousness arise in all of us.

Nobody was shocked to hear about John because everyone knew about it.

The shocking thing was to hear it brought up publicly and calling for “church discipline!”

All kinds of images and thoughts instantly flood our minds.

Someone remembers reading Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter, and imagines forcing John to wear a large red A on the front of his clothing.

Someone else thinks immediately of John’s family and imagines how this will devastate them.

Most of us become introspective, instantly aware of our own shortcomings, imagining our names being read before the church in this way.

In defense of ourselves, more than for John, we immediately remember snatches of Scripture:

“Judge not lest you be judged.”

“Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.”

And we remember something about hypocrites in the Bible and we don’t want to be that.

Words like mercy, grace, and patience come to mind.

Then we ask ourselves, is this an invasion of privacy?
 Isn't a person's relationship with God a private matter?
 Shouldn't we leave this to God?
 Does the church have any right to be involved?

As you could guess, our text today will address the issue of church discipline.

To create the proper context for seriously considering that issue I think it is important to be reminded of two other fundamental issues:

What is the church and what is discipline?

I don't have time in this message to explore these two issues in detail but they are foundational to a proper understanding of today's text.

First of all what is the church?

In the Bible the word "church" is given not to buildings or organizations, though neither of those is wrong, but the word is given to people.

But not just to any people but to people converted to Christ – to people who belong to and are following Jesus. The church is otherwise called the body of Christ, the people of God, or the fellowship of the saints.

Sometimes the word church will refer to all believers of all places and all times collectively – the church universal.

More frequently the word refers to all the believers of a particular local church.

With only a couple of exceptions the letters that comprise the New Testament are letters to a local church such as the church in Rome or the church in Thessalonica.

In all cases the church is understood as a corporate entity – it is a group of people in relationship with Christ and hence in relationship with one another.

It is that relationship to one another that is most important to understand when we think of church discipline.

Please hear this clearly: Christianity is very personal but it is not private.

Each person is individually drawn by God's grace and must individually respond in faith to become a Christian but becoming a Christian means we become part of a family, responsible for and to each other.

Our relationship with God is very personal but it is not private because we are called to belong to each other in the church.

The church is not a term to simply describe a collection of individual Christians.

Church is a term to describe individuals in relationship with each other under the leadership of their master Jesus.

There is no support in Scripture for "Lone Ranger Christians".

Calling oneself a Christian and yet not committing to a local church is a contradiction of terms.

My point in all of this is that if we are Christians, how we conduct ourselves in everyday life is not a private matter.

It is a matter of the church even more than how you conduct yourself is a matter of your family.

Secondly, what is discipline?

The minute I say it, it is obvious to you that discipline and discipleship are closely related.

Dallas Willard in his book The Divine Conspiracy says that when we become Christians we become apprentices of Jesus.

He is the master and we are his disciples – learning to be like him.

We listen to him, we watch him, we emulate him.

Christ came not only to save his church but to sanctify it – to make it holy – to be like him.

And thus in his discipling of us he disciplines us – he corrects us, he rebukes us, he uses what is necessary to keep us moving in the right direction.

Discipline is a mark of love.

Hebrews 12:6 "Those whom the Lord loves he disciplines... God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined...then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our (human) fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

An absence of discipline, whether in the home or the church, demonstrates an absence of love!

We are the church, we are responsible for each other, and love demands that we exercise loving discipline.

Now to our text:

2 Thessalonians 3:6-15

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. ⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, ⁸nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. ⁹We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. ¹⁰For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

¹¹We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. ¹²Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. ¹³And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right.

¹⁴If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. ¹⁵Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

It is obvious from this text that there were people of that church that for some reason had stopped working and were apparently sponging off the rest.

From both what the writer, the Apostle Paul, says about those people and what he says about himself in contrast to those people we get an idea of what they were like:

They were idle, not working to earn their own way, sponging off others, and they were compounding their wrong behavior by being busybodies – creating problems in the church – probably by their undisciplined conversation.

They had too much time on their hands and they got on the phone (so to speak) and caused no end of controversy by their gossip or their wrong ideas.

While that is the particular issue Paul is addressing, it is just as important to note that **the major instruction** in the passage is not to those who were idle but **to the church on how to respond to them.**

With the exception of verse 12 where Paul indirectly addresses those idle busybodies by saying to them, “settle down and earn the bread they eat”, Paul’s instruction is **how the church is to discipline those people.**

In this text Paul speaks about **when** church discipline is called for. Secondly, he tells **how** church discipline is to be administered. Thirdly, he spells out **why** discipline is necessary.

When, how and why.

When is church discipline called for?

The answer: anytime a fellow Christian persists in a sin.

The Greek word we translate as “discipline” is *paideia*, meaning child-training or the formation of adulthood.

In Christianity it has to do with growing up spiritual to be more like Christ.

Discipline comes in many forms from very mild to quite severe.

Simple teaching is a form of discipline – it informs and corrects our behavior whether that is a father to a child or a pastor to a congregation.

Another form of discipline is a rebuke – this is a pointed correction when simple instruction doesn't effect a change.

In a rebuke we are strongly called to change specific behavior.

Punishment can be discipline – an even stronger method of getting our attention when teaching and rebuke have been insufficient.

So church discipline is when one believer helps another believer understand something of what Christ-following is about.

Church discipline is when one believer confronts another believer about a particular sin in his life.

Church discipline is when the whole church confronts a believer about the sin in his life.

What kind of discipline is called for depends on the believer's response.

Notice how the method of discipline escalates in the Thessalonian's case. In the case before us in the church at Thessalonica, Paul had instructed them when he was with them about this issue of idleness.

Paul and his companions not only modeled a responsible lifestyle but according to what he wrote to them in his first letter he had actually spoken to the issue.

1 Thessalonians 4:11-12

Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you..."

Paul had instructed them in what was proper but at the time of the first letter, some had disregarded that teaching.

And so Paul writes admonishing them, even rebuking them and asking the church in Thessalonica to do the same:

1 Thessalonians 5:14

And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle,

By the time Paul writes his second letter to that church, he is aware that some in the church have persisted in their sin in spite of the earlier teaching and the earlier rebuke.

2 Thessalonians 3: 6 "...We command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us."

And so here he calls for a more severe form of discipline.

So when is church discipline called for?

Anytime a fellow Christian persists in a sin.

And the longer they stubbornly persist in sin the stronger becomes the form of discipline.

The second issue Paul demonstrates, in part, is how church discipline is to be administered.

In verse 6 Paul wrote, "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us."

Before talking about the "how" of church discipline I want you, who think church discipline is inappropriate, to hear Paul's strong words to the church: "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ we command you..." In the name of the Lord we command you.

To me, that doesn't sound like church discipline is optional.

Daniel Wray has written, "It is necessary in our hardened and apostate age for the church to be called back to the New Testament doctrine of church discipline. In our day, the church has become tolerant of sin even when it is found in her own people. This warrants the wrath of God upon the church's indifference to his holiness. The modern church seems more willing to ignore sin than to denounce it, and more ready to compromise God's law than to proclaim it. It is mournful that so many churches refuse to take sin seriously... The church cannot stand before (the world) while ignoring sin in her ranks." (Wray [Biblical Church Discipline](#))

Through the ages the church has recognized her responsibility to discipline.

The Belgic Confession (1561) indicates three characteristics “by which the true church is known”: the preaching of scripture, the administration of the sacraments and the exercise of church discipline.

R.C. Sproul, in our own day has written, “The church is called not only to a ministry of reconciliation, but a ministry of nurture to those within her gates. Part of that nurture includes church discipline.” ([In Search of Dignity](#) p182)

Refusing to confront sin in our own lives and in the lives of the people of the church is dangerous to spiritual growth and contrary to God’s express commands.

How then is the discipline to be administered?

In verse 6 Paul said “we command you brothers to **keep away from** every brother who is idle.”

In verse 14 he adds, “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, **take special note of him. Do not associate with him.**”

Paul said a similar thing in a different situation to the local church in Rome:

Romans 16:17-18 “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.”

Here Paul says, “take special note of him”.

Be aware, don’t overlook it, understand how serious this is. You can’t ignore this and still love your brother and be faithful to Christ.

Paul says, “Keep away from” them... Don’t associate with” them.

The words “don’t associate with” mean “to avoid or hold oneself apart from something or someone.”

In 1 Corinthians 5:9-11 Paul likewise instructs the church to withdraw fellowship from persons who claim to follow Christ and still persist in disobedient behavior.

“Are you suggesting that if a Christian does something wrong, the rest of us in the church are to stop all contact with them?”

Remember the text, this is not Paul’s first instruction regarding these people who won’t obey.

He had modeled, he had instructed, he had rebuked, he had even asked the church to warn them.

Only after all those efforts at getting those Christians to turn around does Paul tell the church to take the next step.

In Matthew 18:15-17 Jesus lays out the same sense of increasing discipline to match increasing rebellion.

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that `every matter may be established by the testimony 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, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Step one: show him his fault privately.

Step two: take one or two others with you to urge your Christian brother to change.

Step three: tell it to the church. In keeping with 2 Thessalonians this telling the church is for the purpose of the church as a whole warning the believer to change.

Step four: the church treats him as a pagan – an unconverted outsider.

It is step four that I believe Paul has in mind in 2 Thessalonians.

When we reach step four in the disciplinary process, we have a very serious situation on our hands.

The Christian in sin is demonstrating such a stubbornness, such a disregard for the commands of the Lord, that it is no longer possible for other believers to fellowship with them as with other believers.

We would no longer trust their counsel, no longer seek their participation in ministry, no longer engage them as fellow

believers but act toward them now as we would toward any unbeliever.

Historically such treatment of an unrepentant believer meant they were removed from all ministries in the church, they were refused communion, but they were encouraged to sit under the teaching the Word so that the Spirit of God might still bring them to repentance.

Does this mean that no other Christian can talk to them about anything?

Is this the “shunning” we have heard of in certain churches in history?

While there is difference of opinion, among good scholars, on this subject, it is my sense that these verses do **not** rule out all contact.

Treating someone as a pagan doesn't mean we don't talk to them, it means we love them.

But it does mean we don't fellowship with them in the ways we do with another believer.

Lastly, we come to the “why” of church discipline.

Paul writes in verses 14-15 “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

As I tried to emphasize at the beginning of this message proper biblical discipline is always done with the motivation of love.

Paul says don't regard him as an enemy but warn him as a brother.

You warn someone of danger because you care about them.

The desire is that he “may feel ashamed”.

Contrary to some modern theories, shame is not always bad. Feeling ashamed over real sin is healthy just as feeling guilty for real sin is healthy, not harmful.

Paul wants the sinning Christian to feel ashamed, to recognize how contrary to his Lord his actions are

and to follow that with repentance, a turning away from that sin to following Christ obediently.

The motive is a genuine care for a Christian brother.

In Galatians 6:1 Paul said it this way, “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.”

Even if the method of discipline must eventually be severe the attitude is always gentle - loving.

In Matthew 18 Jesus said we are to treat the sinning Christian as a “brother”.

Even in the very severe discipline instruction of 1 Corinthians 5 Paul says the purpose of the discipline is that “his spirit (may be) saved on the day of the Lord.”

Church discipline, whether it is one on one or by proclamation of the entire church, must **always, always, always and only** be done out of love.

Hebrews 12:6ff “Those whom the Lord loves he disciplines... God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.”

As we sat in that church business meeting that night when John’s situation was announced, most of us were flooded with thoughts and emotions.

We thought of John, his wife and children, the church and most of all of Jesus Christ who loves his church and loves John.

Yes, this is a highly personal matter but it is not a private matter.

Yes, this sin of John’s is forgivable but it is very serious and cannot be ignored.

Won’t this just drive John away from us and the church?

When being liked by the sinner is more important to us than their spiritual welfare and Christ’s commands, it is no longer love motivating us.

Discipline will not ruin the Holy Spirit’s ability to minister to John, but is, according to the Bible, part of the Holy

Spirit's ministry to John – discipline may not feel good but it is thereby no less love.

No, church discipline is not judgmental.

Christ has already judged it as sin.

He has asked us to love John enough to tell him so and to tell him so strongly.

I have four applications for this message.

1. I call on the leadership and the Partners of Southern Gables Church to again love Jesus and each other **enough** to be willing to confront each other about sin in our lives and exercise church discipline.

G.I. Williamson wrote, “Lack of church discipline is to be seen for what it really is – not a loving concern... but an indifference to the honor of Christ and the welfare of the church” and the spiritual welfare of individual believers. (In Westminster Shorter Catechism Study Guide)

2. I call on any who are living in sin to be warned that sin is serious business and you must repent and repent now.

God's grace is great enough that he will discipline you severely if that is what it takes to turn you around.

3. And lastly, to the hundreds of you Christians who call SGC your church home but are not Partner/members of the church, I implore you to do what Christians of all ages have done – publicly declare your commitment to the rest of us in this local church by becoming a partner.

Take your Christianity so seriously that you want to be held accountable for your actions.

And love the others of us enough to want to hold us accountable. That's part of what it means to belong to the church.

Church discipline – the loving thing to do.

