

I invite you to open your bibles to today's scripture text which can be found in the book of Matthew chapter 18, verses 12-22. We continue in our series "the peacemakers". Today's scripture reveals to us that Discipline is God's gift and blessing to the church.

Our Fathers Word

12 "What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? 13 And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. 14 In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

15 "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. 16 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.' 17 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.

18 "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

19 "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

This is the word of God for the people of God

One fact we can all appreciate, is that excellence requires discipline. Most Americans cannot help admiring the benefits of discipline. One indication of our love for discipline is our ongoing admiration for successful sports coaches. These coaches use intense training and strict discipline to turn his team into champions. These coaches diligently taught their players the right moves, and promptly corrected them when they made a wrong play. Decades after their victories, we are still recounting and admiring the discipline the coaches used to push their teams to the heights of excellence.

Our appreciation for discipline is not limited to sports. It also shows itself in our love for the performing arts. Parents and audiences alike appreciate music teachers, dance instructors, and symphony conductors who bring out the best in their students and players by teaching them proper technique and pointing out their errors so they can perform with excellence.

Most of us also value the strict discipline of our armed forces. In an increasingly dangerous world, we are more indebted than ever to the men and women who serve in our military. If we understand their mission, we appreciate the fact that their trainers have spared no pains to instill the highest levels of skill and discipline, which may actually save the lives of these soldiers as they risk everything to guard our freedoms.

Our appreciation for discipline even affects the way we view the families in our own church today. We admire and even envy parents who consistently teach their children how to behave properly and who lovingly discipline them when they disobey.

We see the peace and contentment that such diligence produces, and we cannot help but wish that our own families were a little more disciplined themselves.

Wherever we look, we see that discipline is a highly desirable quality. If it is cultivated with *humility* and *consistency*, discipline not only can move us toward excellence but also can open the way to a fulfilling, productive, and joyful life.

Even if you agree that discipline is an admirable quality in sports, the performing arts, the military, or raising children, you see that we will soon be talking about discipline within the church. Like many Americans, you may automatically think of church discipline as being legalistic, harsh, and judgmental. If so, you are not thinking of discipline as God does.

The Bible clearly teaches that to God, discipline is all about love. Proper discipline originates from God himself and is always presented in Scripture as a sign of genuine love.

“The Lord disciplines those he loves” (Heb. 12:6).

“Blessed is the man you discipline, O Lord, the man you teach from your law” (Ps. 94:12).

“Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline” (Rev. 3:19).

Yet we all know that discipline within the church, as well as in other arenas of life, is not always done as God commands. Pastors, parents, coaches, and drill instructors are all tainted by sin; because of this, sometimes discipline is carried out in a selfish, unloving, and unjust manner. This has led many Christians to conclude that the church should drop the practice of church discipline altogether.

If this is your attitude this morning, I ask you to open your mind for the next few minutes and look at this issue *not* through the clouded lens of your own opinion or experience, but through the clear and reliable lens of Scripture. If you do, I believe you will soon see that when church discipline is practiced in the love of Christ, it is one of God's greatest gifts and blessings to his church.

God is the best of all parents! He knows that his family, the Church, needs discipline to survive and thrive. Like football players, concert pianists, elite soldiers, and young children, we need to be *taught what is right* and also to be *lovingly corrected* when we do something contrary to what God teaches us in his Word.

These two types of discipline—affirmative instruction and remedial correction—are sometimes referred to as “formative discipline” and “corrective or restorative discipline.”

Ninety-nine percent of church life involves ***formative*** discipline. This process of teaching, modeling, and encouraging is intended to help us mature in our faith and grow to be like Jesus. This stimulating and joyful dimension of the Christian life is beautifully described in Acts 2:42-47:

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

As indicated in this passage and others like it, formative discipline includes many different activities that God has designed to transform our minds, habits, and character. This process begins with evangelism, through which we learn of our sin and the judgment we deserve, and also of the marvelous salvation God has secured for us through the death and resurrection of his precious Son (see Col. 1:19-20).

When we put our trust in Christ, we gain not only eternal life but also the blessings of a life-long process of being conformed to his image through formative discipline. Ways that we are made more like Jesus include:

- Listening to the public preaching and proclamation of God's Word
- Participating in Sunday school classes, Bible studies, and small groups (Heb. 10:24-25)
- Entering into personal discipling or accountability relationships (Prov. 27:17; 13:20; Eccl. 4:9-12)
- Receiving and giving material aid through acts of individual mercy or ministerial care (1 Tim. 5:16; Acts 4:34-35; 6:1-7)
- Supporting or participating in missions work, through which we ourselves grow in faith and character and share the blessings of the gospel with others (Acts 13:1-3; 14:27)

Scripture repeatedly teaches that the vast majority of the formative interactions between members of the church, and especially between members and church leaders, should be positive, encouraging, and comforting. As Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 2:11; "For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory" (1 Thess. 5:11; 2 Tim. 2:24; 4:2; Heb. 10:25).

The goal of this formative process is two-fold. First, it is intended to help each of us to mature in our faith and character so that we may “share in [God’s] holiness” (Heb. 12:10) as he enables us to fulfill his command in to be “self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined” (Titus 1:8).

Second, the pleasantness and blessings of this process are designed to attract others to Christ and accelerate the growth of his church. Notice that Acts 2:47b comes immediately after the formative discipline of the early church is described: “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

So you see, discipline really is God’s gift and blessing to his church!

Unfortunately, just as the children in our families do not always obey or get along well, people in the church do not always follow God faithfully or get along with one another. When this happens, God calls us to respond to the problem in a loving and redemptive manner that is intended to lead people to repentance, restore broken relationships, strengthen the church, and bring honor to God.

As I mentioned earlier, this process may be referred to as “corrective” or “restorative” discipline. Jesus himself establishes this process as an essential characteristic of a true church. Today’s scripture reveals our Lord’s teaching in Matthew 18:12-22 (read passage; if time permits, read through verse 35).

Before we study the various steps of the disciplinary process that Jesus prescribes for his church, I would like you to note the “bookends of love” that he has built into this passage.

Jesus begins his teaching on corrective discipline with the image of a loving shepherd who realizes that one of his precious lambs has wandered away and fallen into danger (vs. 12-14). The metaphor is a reference to the many passages of Scripture that portray God as a loving shepherd who constantly looks out for his sheep and goes after them when they stray from his protection. A wonderful example is Isaiah 40:11, which promises, “He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young” (Ps. 23:1-4; Ezek. 34:11-12; John 10:11).

Jesus repeats this theme of loving care and restoration at the end of his discourse by commanding us to forgive those who have wronged us just as God has forgiven us for the many, far more serious wrongs we have committed against him (vs. 21-35). Jesus is teaching that the ultimate goal of church discipline is to forgive and be reconciled with a brother or sister who has strayed from the Lord and fallen into sin.

Shepherding ... forgiveness ... reconciliation. These are the hallmarks of the gospel of Jesus Christ! Clearly, we are never to see or approach church discipline as a harsh or vindictive process, but only as a means to imitate the love of a shepherd who is doing everything possible to rescue a beloved lamb who has strayed from the fold.

- **Step 1 - Correct Privately.**

Now that we have established the loving, redemptive context for corrective discipline, let's walk through the process Jesus gives us in today's scripture text, contrasting man's ways with God's ways.

Imagine that another Christian has done something that you believe is contrary to God's Word. What should you do?

If you listen to the counsel of the world around you, what you will probably hear is, "mind your own business," "live and let live," and "be tolerant."

If you follow the world's advice, you will say nothing to a Christian friend who regularly offends others in the workplace, or to a married co-worker who is flirting with another worker and seems to be moving toward adultery. As you stand silently by, watching them plunge blindly ahead with their sin, do not be surprised when you see careers ruined or families torn apart through divorce.

What does God say you should do in a situation like this? "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" (Matt. 18:15; cf. Lev. 19:17; Prov. 9:8; 19:18; 24:11-12; 27:5-6; 28:23; Gal. 6:1-2; James 5:19-20).

We need to know that this passage is not a license for busy-bodies. Let's consider these two verses here, Pr 19:11 A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense. 1 Pe 4:8 8 Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.

As these two verses indicate, one of the marks of Christian maturity is to overlook minor offenses and to cover them with love. But if an offense is too serious to overlook, love will compel us to go and seek to show a brother or sister where he or she may be straying from the safety of God's path.

Be prepared for the fact that the world will constantly try to convince you that offering correction is inevitably unloving and judgmental. It will help to remember that in God's eyes it is often the most loving thing we can do for each other.

Discipline is God's gift and blessing to the church!

- **Step 2 – Take one or two others along.**

But what if the other person doesn't listen to you? What if he or she keeps on doing something you believe is wrong?

The world says, "Tell anyone and everyone about it!" Tell your spouse, your friends, your hairdresser, and others in church—anyone who you can bring to your side or persuade to think less of the person who has offended you. Gossip to everyone about it ... except the person who really needs to hear what you have to say: the person you are talking about. If you follow this advice, you may succeed in ruining that person's reputation, but you will do nothing to help him see and change his harmful behavior.

What does God say you should do for the person who is caught in sin? "If he will not listen to you, **take** one or two others **along** so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses" (Matt. 18:16).

It's not easy to go to someone who is caught in sin, even if you take others along. Often we may not see immediate repentance. But if you are obedient, you are certainly more likely to see a brother or sister return to the Lord than if you do nothing but sit in silence or spread gossip about them. As Hebrews 12:11 promises, "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."

- **Step 3 – Tell it to the church.**

But what if one or two people get involved, and the person still won't change his ways?

The world, and even many people in the church, will say, "We've done all we can and this is taking much too much time, so let's just drop it."

What happens when we simply give up on people who will not listen to us? They usually continue in their sin, which can only bring them further grief and misery. And all too often, they continue to inflict harm on others.

For example, some people will actually join a church so that they can develop business contacts. In one case, a man persuaded several retired people to give him thousands of dollars to invest in a real estate venture. When the venture failed to produce the profits he had promised, the investors demanded their money back, as he had promised. He refused, so they went to the church elders, who also asked the man to return the money. Rather than repent, the man simply left the church. The elders dropped the matter, and said nothing to the congregation about his fraudulent conduct. The man began attending a nearby church, where he found other investors. But he also continued to take money from other members of the first church who knew nothing about his dishonest behavior. Because the elders had not informed their own congregation as well as a neighboring church about a member's dishonest ways, that man continued in his sin and many people lost thousands of dollars. Stopping discipline prematurely often leads to greater harm.

What does God say we should do when a person will not repent of a sin that is too serious to overlook? “If he refuses to listen to them [the two or three initial confronters], **tell it to the church**” (Matt. 18:17).

In most situations, the matter should first be brought only to the church leaders, who might still be able to resolve the problem by bringing their God-given ecclesiastical authority to bear on the situation. If that does not settle the matter, then the leaders may selectively inform others in the church who might be able to influence the person who is caught in sin. If even that does not work, then the leaders may need to inform anyone in the church who might be harmed by the person’s ongoing sin.

Brothers and sisters, discipline is God’s gift and blessing to the church!

Step 4 – Treat him as a pagan or a tax collector.

But what if the person still won’t repent, even after others in the church do all they can to persuade him to repent?

The world would say, “Judge not lest ye be judged,” misquoting Scripture to mean that the church has no right to judge and respond to a person’s wrong conduct.

When a church takes this course, we implicitly approve of conduct that may continue to do great harm, both to the sinful individual and to innocent bystanders. We also send a message to the rest of the congregation that sin is not a serious matter, which can lead others to engage in equally harmful conduct of their own, this is what *1 Co 5:6-7* reveals to us,

6 Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? 7 Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast — as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.

For example, if we say and do nothing when a person in our church walks out on a marriage without biblical grounds, we send the message that marriage vows mean nothing, and that people are free to leave their families or commit adultery. Large segments of the American church have followed this course for decades. As a result, the divorce rate among Christians in our country today is drastically high. Failing to carry out needed discipline only encourages sin and perpetuates harm.

What does God say we should do when a brother or sister hardens his or her heart against the loving discipline of his church? **“If he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector”** (Matt. 18:17b; see 18-20; 1 Cor. 5:9-13; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15; Titus 3:10).

This does not mean that we can declare that certain people are unsaved and condemned to hell. Rather, it means that we are warning them that their decision to defy the counsel of Christ's church is so serious that they should tremble at the possibility that they do not have a saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This disciplinary step is designed to be a last final spiritual wake-up call to a brother or sister who is about to plunge ahead with sinful choices that could permanently scar them and those they love.

It also serves as a sober warning to others who may be setting out on similar paths. Finally, it sends a message to the world that we take God seriously and are unwilling to demean his holiness.

discipline is God's gift and blessing to the church

Step 5 – Forgive as God has forgiven you.

There is one more important question we must consider: What should we do if a person eventually repents of his sin and wants to be reconciled to the church?

Jesus himself tells us what the world and even some Christians would say. In verses 20-32 of Matthew 18, he describes the unmerciful servant, who wants all of his own wrongs forgiven, but will not forgive another. This kind of person has a standard reply to all who've done wrong is, "Forgive you? Never! Not after all you've done." This kind of unloving and unforgiving attitude robs people of any of the hope of reconciliation and consigns them to despair.

How does God want us to respond those who repent of their wrongs, even if they've committed them over and over? "Forgive your brother from your heart ... seventy-seven times" (Matt. 18:21-22; Luke 17:3-4).

Lk 17:3-4 So watch yourselves. "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. 4 If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."

As we have seen over and over again, discipline truly is God's gift and blessing to the church, especially when we compare it to the hopeless and destructive counsel of the world.

It is never easy to offer correction to others or to receive it. But if we want to be faithful to our Lord and see his flock shepherded with the same love and care that he himself would give, each of us must renounce our worldly attitudes toward church discipline and learn to embrace and support it as a sign of true love and compassion.

As we do so, and draw on God's marvelous love and grace, we could work together to restore those who are wandering from the Lord. In particular, we could see many marriages rescued from the precipice of divorce, and many children spared the agony of being torn between two estranged parents.

By God's grace, we could deter others from even starting down the road to destructive sin, and strengthen their effort to grow in godliness through loving formative discipline.

Most of all, we could honor God by showing respect for his holiness, which he is graciously extending to his church (Eph. 5:25-27).

All of this is possible if we will take God at his Word and believe him when he says, "The Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in" (Prov. 3:12).

Challenge: The next time you are faced with disciplining someone (a child, subordinate, etc.) challenge yourself to discipline as God disciplines: out of love for that person, not retribution.

Gracious God,

We thank you God for this day, we thank you Jesus for your mercy,

We thank you for your Love, we bless you Lord.

We know that your heart is for the best for us,

As we lift up our hearts to you we thank for your presence in our lives,

For your wonderful example of gentle and loving discipline.

For the amazing restorative hand that you have upon us Father.

Help us to draw upon your marvelous love and grace.

So that we may work together to restore those who are wandering from you.

Give us your grace to aid us to deter others from even starting down

The road that leads to destructive sin.

Grant us your wisdom that we may have loving tender words that will

Strengthen their effort to grow in godliness through formative discipline.

Words that will build them up and draw them back to you in repentance.

Help us to discipline as our Lord's Jesus's example reveals to us,

With our goal to forgive and be reconciled with those

who have fallen away from you Lord, and fallen into sin.

Most of all may we honor you Father by showing respect for your holiness,

Which you so graciously extend to your church.

May you have all the honor, and the glory.

AMEN