



*Spreading the
fame of God by
making disciples
of Jesus Christ*

Helping the Unhealthy: The Purpose and Process of Church Discipline

The Church is a community of believers—those who confess Jesus Christ as Savior and submit to Him as Lord. Though all true disciples seek to walk in ongoing repentance and faith, there are times when a believer may drift into sin, whether through unbelief, pride, or willful disobedience. When such sin is not only present but also persisted in—embraced as part of one’s lifestyle—it becomes the sacred responsibility of the Church, not merely its leaders, to lovingly pursue restoration. This pursuit is born out of love for the individual and a deep desire to uphold the honor of Christ and the witness of His body.

The biblical pattern for this process is outlined by our Lord in Matthew 18:15–17, where He teaches a four-step approach for addressing unrepentant sin in the lives of the members of His church. This process is not punitive but redemptive; its goal is restoration, not rejection. Let’s walk through these steps:

Step 1: Private Confrontation (Matthew 18:15)

“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.”

When a believer perceives sin in a fellow Christian, the first step is to approach that person privately. The goal is clarity and reconciliation—not accusation. This conversation should be gentle, humble, and grounded in biblical truth and a clear standard of living and/or doctrinal fidelity (Galatians 6:1), motivated by love and the desire to “gain your brother.” If the individual listens and repents, the process ends there, and restoration is achieved. If they dismiss or deny the concern without repentance, the process continues.

Step 2: Small Group Confirmation and Counsel (Matthew 18:16; Galatians 6:1)

“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 private confrontation fails, bring one or two mature believers (“you who are spiritual” - Galatians 6:1) to lovingly witness the conversation and help bring clarity to the situation or issue. The role of the witnesses is not to act as prosecutors but as spiritual mediators—ensuring the truth is rightly discerned according to Scripture, not personal offense. At this stage, it’s important to distinguish between misunderstandings, unintentional wrongdoing, and genuine sin. The goal is to confirm the facts, bring biblical counsel, and urge repentance and reconciliation. Some conflicts are not rooted in sin but arise from misunderstandings or misinterpretations of events that are not, in themselves, wrong. In such cases, both parties are called to exercise what is often referred to as

“stretch love”—a love that bears with one another generously and patiently: “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling” (1 Peter 4:8–9). If the issue stems from sin—a refusal to trust and obey God—the witnesses help bring the Word of God to bear and remind the person of Christ’s example and sacrifice (Ephesians 5:1–2). If the individual still resists correction and refuses to repent, the next step follows.

Step 3: Public Appeal to the Church (Matthew 18:17a)

“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.”

At this stage, Jesus intensifies both the attention and the scope of involvement by commanding the matter be brought before the entire church. The word “tell” in Matthew 18:17 is in the imperative—this is not a suggestion, but a clear command from Christ when the first two steps of private and small-group confrontation have failed.

This raises understandable questions: “Won’t this be awkward for everyone?” “Isn’t this humiliating for the person involved?” “Can this truly be considered loving?” These are honest and appropriate concerns—and likely the very kinds of questions Jesus’ first disciples wrestled with as well. But the most important question is this: Why would Jesus command His followers to do this? The answer lies in the escalating seriousness and redemptive intent of each step. In steps one and two, the focus is on clarity, truth, and restoration in private and semi-private contexts. But when someone refuses those appeals, the matter is no longer just personal—it now becomes communal. The unrepentant sin introduces a fracture in the visible body of Christ, and that fracture must be addressed openly for the good of the church and the soul of the individual.

By involving the church, Jesus introduces a new dynamic: corporate accountability. This step underscores the gravity of the situation and applies loving pressure to call the sinner to repentance. It is meant to shock the individual into seeing the seriousness of their sin—not through shame for shame’s sake, but to awaken them to the break in fellowship both with the Lord and His people. The discomfort, awkwardness, and sorrow that accompany this process are not incidental; they are part of God’s design. The relational strain with the church is meant to mirror the spiritual strain between the person and Christ. The visible church becomes a living picture of the invisible reality—the person is separating themselves from Christ through rejecting His Lordship in their life. This reality cannot continue to be ignored or minimized.

Jesus calls the church—pastors and members alike—to plead with the person in love: “Turn back. Reject the world’s pleasure and counsel. Submit again to Christ.” This is not about moral superiority. Every believer in the church must recognize that they too may one day need this very same correction. We practice this discipline as fellow sinners saved by grace, holding one another accountable out of shared love for Christ and His holiness. No faithful church delights in this kind of confrontation. Discipline is not a joy in itself, but we find joy in obeying Christ—and in the hope that, through our obedience, God will bring about restoration and spiritual renewal. But what if even the whole church is ignored? Jesus does not leave us guessing. He leads us into the final and most difficult step.

At this point, the issue is brought before the church—not to shame the individual, but to multiply the voices calling them back to Christ. This public step reflects the seriousness of unrepentant sin and the collective concern of the body. The congregation is called to pray, pursue, and plead with the wayward believer. This is not mob judgment, but a solemn and united appeal to repentance. The church acts as the voice of Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:20), urging the person to turn back while there is still time. If even this appeal is refused, then the final step becomes necessary.

Step 4: Removal from Fellowship (Matthew 18:17b; 1 Corinthians 5:4–5)

“And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

Persistent refusal to repent leads to the painful yet necessary step of removing the person from the fellowship of the church. Jesus commands that the unrepentant be treated as outsiders—no longer affirmed as a fellow disciple of His, but a person in need of the gospel. This does not mean we respond with hostility or shunning, but with a sober recognition that their life no longer reflects their profession of faith. In other words, our concern is not merely for their behavior—it is for their very soul.

Paul himself crossed this bridge in Corinth where he commands the church to remove a sinning member so that “his spirit may be saved” (1 Corinthians 5:4–5). Far from being punitive, this act exposes the sinner to the discipline of God with the hope of repentance. Church discipline, when rightly administered, is like surgery—it may wound, but it wounds to heal. Paul later rejoiced when that same Corinthian believer repented and was to be restored: “You should rather turn to forgive and comfort him... so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow... reaffirm your love for him” (2 Corinthians 2:7–8).

Churches must be equally bold in discipline and tender in restoration. Satan seeks imbalance—either through indifference to sin or unwillingness to forgive the repentant. As the Apostle warned: “so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs (2 Corinthians 2:11).

Jesus understood that this process of church discipline would be emotionally difficult. He knew it would raise hard questions in our minds: Isn’t this unloving? Isn’t this too intrusive? Where is the grace we all need? Who are we to judge? Jesus anticipates this very crisis of conscience—the tension between truth and tenderness—and He speaks directly into it.

In Matthew 18:18–20, immediately following His instructions on church discipline, Jesus says:

“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.”

These verses are not just general encouragement—they are Christ’s reassurance that He is present and actively involved in this very moment of corporate obedience. Jesus is not a distant bystander to the church’s hard decisions; He is in the midst of it, validating the process and affirming its necessity. His words remind us that this is not a man-made idea, but a heaven-sanctioned act of love and truth. Rather than letting our feelings steer us, Jesus calls us to let His truth lead us by faith. From the very first private conversation to the final public plea, He is with His people,

guiding and authorizing every step in faithful obedience. The Church must not shrink back under the emotional weight. Christ stands with His Church in this painful, grace-filled act of restoring the wayward.

Why Church Discipline Matters

Church discipline reflects God's holiness, Christ's love, and the Spirit's power. It guards the purity of the church, protects the witness of the gospel (Acts 5:11), and shepherds souls toward eternal life (Hebrews 12:11). In every step, the aim is to win the brother or sister back—not to lose them. The process of Helping the Spiritually Unhealthy, should be approached with humility, gentleness, and deep sorrow—but never ignored. True love is never passive—it moves us to act. Yet it is truth that shapes and guards our understanding of what love is and does.

May the Lord give us grace to obey His commands—not only in seasons of joy but also in seasons of discipline and restoration. And may we, as Grace Fellowship, be a church marked by both truth and love—caring deeply for one another and committed to spreading the fame of God by making disciples of Jesus Christ.

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