

HEBREWS
Loving Discipline
Hebrews 12:3-11, Part 2
Matthew 18:15-20

If you are new to Grace Community Church you may have discerned that we are in a series on the book of Hebrews. This series began in mid-September and I hope that we will finish before mid-August when college students return, but it is more than okay if we go into Labor Day.

In the book of Hebrews, we have learned that anything good in our lives is the result of Jesus' perfect sacrifice that ended all sacrifices. It is the blood of the Lamb that makes us worthy to stand accepted in God's presence, and it is the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work in our lives building the life of Jesus in us through union with him that enables us to live in ways that please the Lord.

Last week, our text was Hebrews 12:3-11 where we learned that our heavenly Father disciplines his children just like our earthly fathers disciplined us, although they did it imperfectly. Our heavenly Father disciplines us in love and his discipline is always perfect. The Father's discipline is far more than corrective punishment. It is also educational and, as we learned with Paul's thorn in the flesh that kept him from pride, it is, at times, preventative in nature. If God does not discipline you, then you are not his child. You remember those conversations with your parents, don't you? "Billy's parents let him stay out until 11." "Oh, does Billy live here now? Do you live in Billy's home? You will be home by no later than 10."

All the things that your parents said that caused you to respond with, "Aw, man – come on!" – are now things that you say to your kids. Why? Why do you say the same things? Because it is your turn and you want to inflict the same pain on your children that

your parents inflicted on you? Of course not! You say the same things because you love your children.

The same thing is true of biblically practiced church discipline. When non-church goers hear about church discipline, words may come to their minds such as “judgmental, legalistic, and hateful.” But, nothing could be further from the truth! If church discipline is done according to a biblical model, it will be conducted with love. The process that Jesus describes in Matthew 18:15-20 is often a slow and patient process with the end goal of restoring the wayward one back into full fellowship and covenant family life.

This morning is Part 2 of the study on discipline in Hebrews 12 – but, it is really not tied to the Hebrews text except as connection to a larger part of the overall topic of discipline. We will spend our time in Matthew 18:15-20 where the pattern for church discipline is described by Jesus. The elders have been thinking and praying and discussing this topic for as long as we have been studying Hebrews.

So, even though the title slide connects this topic with Hebrews 12, our time will be in Matthew 18:15-20, which we will read as our text. Would you please stand as God’s Word is read? I will be reading from the ESV. 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. 16 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. 17 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. 18 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. 19 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. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

You probably have some house rules in your home. Some of you do not allow certain words to be used in the home. Others have table rules and expectations about chores and responsibilities and how members of the family are to represent the family outside the home. If rules are broken, there are consequences.

To say that the church should suspend its responsibility to carry out church discipline is as unwise as immediately suspending the rules in your family. If you think that all discipline is inappropriate because it keeps the one being disciplined from living according to his or her own choices – and, those may vary from day to day, by the way – then the idea of church discipline will be difficult for you. If you believe that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, you will recognize a loving heart behind the call for discipline in God’s Word.

There is no comprehensive list of offenses anywhere in the NT that require church discipline, which means that not all such offenses are listed. And, while Matthew 18:15-20 is a guide for church discipline, it is not an exact formula, but, rather, a pattern to be followed when dealing with some of the most painful matters a church ever encounters.

Let’s examine the text before talking more specifically about do’s and don’ts. One of the things that you will notice is that every effort is made to protect the dignity of the offending party by keeping the number of people involved in correction as small as possible. The process begins when a brother or sister sins against a member of the covenant family. It is certainly legitimate to apply this to one who sins against the body by seriously sinning in a way that is forbidden in Scripture. In light of all that the NT says about forgiving one

another and bearing long with one another, the sin in question is a serious one. If you know that a brother or sister is in sin, you should come to the elders right away, correct? No. You should go to your brother or sister and speak to him or her privately. I recognize that you may well want a witness, and in no way does it seem to me that a witness would violate the intent behind the established pattern of an initial one on one.

It is clear that this is a serious sin because if your brother hears you and repents, you have *gained* your brother. This is language that indicates that he was in danger of falling away from the faith. There is pressure from our culture to not only let a person live in such a manner that there is concern for his or her relationship with the Lord, but you are called to accept and applaud, as brave, his or her public acknowledgment of those choices. To be so indiscriminate, though, is not only to deny your responsibility as a follower of Jesus, but you are endangering your brother or sister by remaining silent.

Remaining silent. Some of you have been criticized for remaining silent this week on the events that happened in Orlando. Others have been criticized for extending sympathy since you have said, in the past, that homosexual relationships are sinful. Some have gone so far as to blame Christians for the massacre by creating such a culture of hate that such an event was inevitable. Let me say without reservation, there is NEVER reason to murder innocent people, nor should we EVER take pleasure when someone with whom we disagree is harmed. I am sure there are some who think of this as judgment, but like Jesus told the ones who asked him about a group of people who were killed in Siloam when a tower fell on them, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish! None of us is better than anyone else, and apart from Jesus, we are doomed.

Jesus was roundly criticized for his association with both men and women who were socially ostracized because of their behavior.

Christians do not hate anyone – not even terrorists who kill Christians. But, our beliefs are based on Scripture and when it comes to matters within the family, we have to follow the patterns laid out in Scripture, regardless of the culture’s position on such matters. There is not a chance that we can explain our position so that it will be widely accepted.

It is a good thing that we are likely going to be forced to decide whether we care more about politics or the gospel. Do you know how believers in the first century would have responded publicly to Orlando? They wouldn’t have responded publicly or they would have been immediately arrested and executed. We get to and I am grateful that we have people like Russell Moore articulating our position in the public square, but there may well be a time when to respond publicly in any way will risk persecution. When you do respond publicly to the events of the day, I hope your response is loving, thoughtful, and gospel-drenched.

Back to Matthew 18. If your brother or sister repents of ungodly behavior or beliefs, end of story and beginning of celebration! No storing up for another time – done. Forgiven. Restored. And almost no one knew that he was in trouble! If she refuses to listen, then several others are to approach the offending party. Preferably, the group will consist of those who are aware of the sin and who lovingly confront the individual. Hey, the world gets this concept, right? One individual, then another, will warn a friend about his or her behavior. Eventually, a group of friends will stage an intervention. Sometimes, though, our covenant family rules are not going to be the same family rules that the world has, and that gets us in trouble with the world. Always love. Always care deeply about all people. Always be true to the gospel.

Steps one and two in this process may take a long time. The pattern that Jesus establishes is stated in short order, but we all recognize

that sinful behavior did not develop overnight, and a patient loving approach is to be taken, recognizing that all of us are capable of falling into sin. When it becomes certain that the brother or sister will not repent, says Jeffrey Gibbs, the church needs to speak a loving word of exclusion. Even though a loving word of exclusion sounds like an oxymoron, far better to know the truth now than later, even though the offending party will find many outside the church who are ready to condemn the church for its actions. And, you can see that this responsibility ultimately belongs to the entire church, not just to church leadership, although the leaders will inevitably be involved in the process much earlier than the entire congregation. You might want to add the elders and the burden they bear with regard to discipline to your prayers. If exclusion is the ultimate result of the process, the wayward brother will be treated, essentially, as an unbeliever. Verses 18-20 delineate what a sobering responsibility is placed upon the church:

18 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. 19 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. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.

In our day, if you do not like what one church believes and practices, you can simply move to another church. Here is the kicker, though: if you are living a lifestyle that is not consistent with the teachings of a gospel-centered church, you will be hard pressed to find another gospel believing church that will accept your lifestyle, unless you slip in and do not let anyone know anything about the choices that led you to leave the church you previously attended. According to our text, though, unless you reconcile with the covenant family of which you are a part, you have problems in heaven as well as on earth. The local church body, for which this

pattern was established, is given stunning authority. Are we apt to misstep when so much is at stake? Yes, but that is why it is up to the entire body to make this final decision to exclude a member of the Grace Community Family, from full participation in the family, which primarily means that the person will be removed from membership rolls and asked not to participate at the Lord's Table. The goal of church discipline is not to show the world how tough we are on sin. We are all sinners, for goodness sake, and but for the grace of God, there go we all! Church discipline is given by God, first, for the good of those who stray. There are other implications for the church as well. We will spend the rest of our time this morning thinking about what church discipline is, and what it is not, and we will start with what it is not, beginning with:

- 1. An opportunity for a "legitimate" power play by an individual or a group**

Remember, the church is about a covenant relationship with Jesus and with one another. This is not about politics, yet almost everything is political in our world in one form or another. Jesus said often that we are not to seek power like the Gentiles do. I am not saying that a believer should not be involved in politics – we have the right to be and I am glad there are believers in office. But the church does not operate like the world does, and seeking to bring someone under church discipline as a move to strengthen one's political power within the church is abhorrent.

The elders are currently dealing with matters that may ultimately be brought before the congregation. I can absolutely assure you that no one is relishing such a thought. It is quite humbling and convicting to be involved in this process. Please do not ever think about church matters in political terms. We all have political instincts of one sort or another, but if we are led by the Spirit, we

will do all we can to follow the godly pattern laid out for us in Matthew 18. Second, church discipline is not:

- 2. Encouragement for the moralists in church to police others in the body**

I hope one of the things you have experienced at Grace is – well, grace! There are very clear commandments in Scripture about murder and adultery and theft, but there are a lot of behaviors that are left open to individual conscience. You may disagree with the way another church family member conducts him or herself, but be careful about condemning someone who has different preferences than you. Next, church discipline is not:

- 3. A platform for promoting anyone’s particular view of Christianity**

That is what NPR and CNN and Rush Limbaugh and Fox News do. Everyone has an agenda. There is no such thing as fair and balanced reporting. Furthermore, I have never seen a close game in which my team lost that I thought was officiated fairly. We are inclined to always present our particular view of whatever it is we believe in ways that point out the wrongheadedness of our opponents. In the 1980’s and 90’s, you could believe anything you wanted. Everything was accepted. In this decade, you had better be on board with the political opinions of those with whom you associate in exactly the way everyone wants you to be – immediately. All the while, the gospel is the same. Our Savior is a rock. Love compels us to reach out to those in the family who are struggling. That is why it often takes so long to complete the process. It is why it is so important to remember the last point – church discipline is not:

- 4. A vehicle for weeding out those with whom you disagree**

This is a tricky one. We all want the right to express our views, correct? We also all believe that we have biblical support for our views. But, we all need to be careful about how we express our views, especially if they differ from the views of church leadership and the body at large. This has to be kept in balance, with then church leadership in no way exercising political power, but as we will see clearly in Hebrews 13, leaders have a spiritual responsibility for the entire church body and unity must be maintained. None of us, though, should use church discipline as means for weeding out those with whom we disagree.

Let's turn to what church discipline is, beginning with:

1. A deep love for the wayward individual

If this is not true of you, *please* do not enter into this delicate process. Even though humans will find a way to mess this up, it is the process God has given us and like almost everything else in this covenant family life, if it is not practiced with love, it can turn ugly. Church discipline according to God's design, though, shows great love for the individual who is either slowly or suddenly walking away from God. If you ever find yourself on the other side of the process, please remember that you are being pursued in love.

Second, church discipline is:

2. The commitment by a local church to follow biblical "covenant family rules" for body life

Following the command to go down the road of church discipline is probably the most neglected family rule in the covenant community. No wonder! It is likely the most difficult family rule we have. What if you only suspended one major rule in your family, such as you decide to begin allowing underage drinking in your home? "I would

never do that!” Exactly! How can we so easily look away from God’s expectations for us as a family? Third, church discipline is:

- 3. The call for all church members to examine their own levels of commitment to God and to holy living**

Galatians 6:1 says it best: “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.” We must always resist the temptation to self-righteousness. Jesus had no patience with the self-righteous Pharisees, and of all people, when we are called to state that we believe someone is no longer living a life that gives us confidence that he/she is a believer, we had best look to our own hearts. But, we cannot fail to practice church discipline because of what the last point reminds us that such practice is:

- 4. Obedience to God’s commands to take seriously the proper teaching of Scripture, the testimony of the church, and the purity of the body**

One of the most difficult things in my job is to encourage you to live a life that is as difficult for me as it is for you. But, there is life-giving power in the Word, especially the preached Word, and proclaim it I must. If we refuse to practice church discipline in our body because of how it may appear to the world, we fail to take seriously God’s commands for us, and we do damage to the testimony of the church. Furthermore, we jeopardize God’s power in our body by compromising the purity of the body. It is not easy to do this the right way, but what about the way of the cross is supposed to be easy, exactly? Only in dying to self and doing what is biblical can life flourish.

In Matthew 18:20, Jesus says that where two or three are gathered together, he is in their midst. This is not a minimum number requirement for Jesus showing up, say, at the park, but in context, it is his comforting and convicting presence when the church is gathered to help a wayward brother or sister. Oh, that we might love one another enough to obey God's command to go after one another when we struggle to follow Jesus, even though we repeatedly fall and get back up. Let's pray.