

Title: Jesus is worth a beautiful bride, pt.2
Text: Matthew 18.15-20
Theme: How the grace of church discipline helps the church pursue the character of God.
Series: Matthew #92
Prop Stmnt. God cares so much about people that he gives us careful instructions to follow so that we can be a happy, holy and unified body of believers.

Sabrina Tetzner was raised in a polygamist sect of the Church of the Latter Day Saints in Colorado City, Arizona. She had 4 children, all of whom were owned by the church. When she ran away for her freedom 8 years ago, she left her children behind. This week she was able to get custody of her children, but when she went to pick them up, members of the community/church (one in the same) surrounded her van for two hours, seeking to delay her while intimidating her, attempting to throw chickens in her van and even kicking it. It's like another world. Yet, we have members of our church who have been shunned by other churches, not to this extreme, but in ways that leave some deep wounds. So, when you hear these words of Christ address the issue that has become known as church discipline, it is quite natural for tension, angst and conflict to arise since your impressions and perhaps experience do not seem to gel with what you have learned about Christ. These instructions of Christ are so good for the church and so necessary for her beauty that when they are neglected the church suffers and when they are abused the church is scarred, usually very, very deeply. This morning I am coming back to this text in order to help bring about a bit more clarification to this subject.

I am going to read our text again in view of the entire chapter because I want you to see again that what Jesus is talking about in these verses is a detailed plan of how to go after a "little one" who has strayed away. The people who are called upon to go after this one are to go in love because they care that the one who is straying is in serious danger. And because the church is called to do this (and not just the leaders) I want you to be informed so that you can participate in this process with compassion and competence.

Read Text:

Last year I was asked to speak at a church leadership conference. The purpose of the conference was to help leaders in local churches help their churches. I was given the freedom to pick my own topic, so I picked the topic of church discipline. Church discipline is not a topic that I enjoy talking about but I am convinced that it is necessary for the health of the church. I volunteered to speak on this, because of the chaos and the tragedy of life in a church that does not understand it, and does not practice it properly. I remember reading this passage as a young man and assuming that there was probably a good reason why no one paid any attention to these words of Jesus anymore. When I was 18 years old I became acquainted with a

church that practiced this. I was stunned. I didn't know of anybody who did this. It seemed so puritanical, so unloving, and so judgmental. I couldn't imagine anyone doing it. Of course at the age of 18 I obviously knew infinitely more than all of the church divines who had come before me, especially the puritans! Church discipline? No one did this anymore, and if they did, no one would attend that church, would they? I wasn't the only who thought like this.

So, last year, when I volunteered to speak on the subject, I did not expect a standing room crowd, and my expectations were more than met. In my first session I had 3. In the second session, I had none, except for the one member of the organizing committee who was sent over so that I would not have my feelings hurt. Quite honestly I was grateful for the 3 who came. Church Discipline is a difficult subject. It raises so many fears because of horror stories we may have heard about or experienced. And yet, the command for the church to practice this is undeniable. Let's review a few things:

1. The Lord of the church commands it. – Matthew 18.15-20
2. The church needs it. – Acts 5, 20
3. The early church practiced it. – 1 Corinthians 5, 1 Timothy 1.19b-20
4. Jesus disciplines the church that does not deal with sin. – Rev. 2.19-23

Consistently we see the pattern throughout Scripture that either you deal with sin, or sin will deal with you. This is true on a personal level and on a congregational level as a church. And yet, to our post-modern ears, church discipline sounds so judgmental. But, I am arguing that church discipline is not only an act of faith, believing that God's wisdom is better than our wisdom, but church discipline is an act of love, because we care so much about a person that we are willing to go and seek their rescue, preferring their need of rescue over our desire for comfort.

Church discipline is not assumed by the culture at large and is not necessarily expected or assumed by some of our members. We therefore live with this uneasy tension when someone is living sinfully, that is, inconsistent with his or her profession of faith. What do we do about it? If we say something, then we are condemned for the sin of judging and nothing it seems is worse than committing that sin these days. On the other hand if we do nothing about it and pretend that everything is fine when someone is living in unrepentant sin, then are we not reinforcing the stereotype that the world has of the church? That is, we are just a bunch of hypocrites who want to tell everyone else how to live but are unwilling to clean up our own house.

How does this fit? Being a Christian is a matter of public record. One who has come to faith in Christ is commanded by Christ to go public with that profession. That is what believer's baptism is. Every example of baptism in the NT is an example of a person who consciously, willfully, informatively and intentionally identifies himself as a member of a community of believers through the public ordinance of baptism. This public profession of faith is the ground then for one's official commitment to

the church (membership). When a person is baptized that person is publicly saying, "I am a follower of Christ" which means that I am your brother or sister." The designation that now rests upon this person is "believer and member". If the believer starts living as an unbeliever, then what has been publicly professed is at odds with how this person is living. What does a believer look like? A believer is supposed to look like Jesus? What does Jesus expect from those who call him Lord and Savior? Is it okay to be habitually dishonest? Is it okay to be dealing in narcotics? Is it okay to pursue an adulterous relationship? It is okay to gossip? Does Jesus care if a person who claims to be a Christian is living as an unbeliever? Does Christ care if a person who claims to carry his name lives more like his enemy than he does Christ? Yes. And does Jesus expect us to care if a professing believer lives as an unbeliever? Yes. So, if we do not address this, then it is clear that we do not take one's profession of faith seriously, or about the commands of Christ.

Let's say that your 4-year old daughter is taking music lessons and she has a recital. Is that recital a big deal? No. It really isn't. It is a big deal to her. It is a big deal to you as a parent. It is a big deal to her teacher, but is it a big deal to the world? No. But, you go, and you clap for her and congratulate her, but her soul is not changed by that recital. She may or not play well, but eternity is not hanging in the balance. On the other hand, when a person professes faith in Christ they are making a claim that has eternal consequences. If the person is genuine in their profession, then we have just gained a brother and that person is now forever in the family of God. If the person is not genuine about it, then we have a serious situation because this person may assume that their standing before God is fine, when in reality they are deceived. Over time, the evidence of authenticity or hypocrisy comes out. That is why Jesus said that you will know them by their fruits. This is a very, very serious issue. Therefore, this is part of the conversation that we should have with one another. We need to look for evidences of grace and encourage those when we see them and we should be concerned when we do not see evidences of grace, but instead, we see arrogance, hard-heartedness, willful disobedience and total boredom with God, His Word and his people. When a person stands before us and is baptized or stands before us to be presented as a member that person is professing faith in Christ. When we accept that person into membership we are publicly labeling that person as a brother or sister in Christ.

What makes a person an attorney? Passing the bar. How do you pass the bar? You have to correctly answer the questions that are given on the test that deal with laws and ethics. Does that mean that you are automatically viewed as an attorney for the rest of your life? No. If you, as an attorney, violate the terms of an attorney, you can be disbarred.

What makes a person a doctor? Passing the boards. How do you pass the boards? You have to correctly answer the questions that are given on the test that deal with medical and ethical issues. However, if you as a doctor, violate the terms of a doctor and are deemed to be a danger to the people you are supposed to treat, you can have your license to practice, revoked. This is true for a CPA, for a social worker, for a

nurse, for a veterinarian. When someone is in a position of definition and trust, we deem it a good and necessary thing to expect ongoing compliance with that. How much greater is it this for the church? The reputation of the gospel is at stake.

Let's look at the two main texts that address this:

Matthew 18.15-20

- Private Meeting
- Private Conference
- Public Announcement
- Public Removal

1 Cor. 5.1-5, 11

Notice that Christ commands that at some point in the process that the entire body is to be involved. While matters in the church are to be dealt with in the church, they are not to be swept under the rug. Another important point to note from both texts is that there is a divine stamp of authorization. (Matthew text) Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. In other words, when you act in accordance with God's Word you have God's authority. In the 1 Corinthians text Paul puts it like this: "When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus..." all of which means that when we gather as a church, there is a significance, an authority, a power and a presence of God that is ours unlike other times. The text that speaks of where 2 or 3 are gathered is referring to the gathering of the church. Even if it is a small church, the gathering of the church in the name of Jesus has the authority of Christ. But, keep in mind that the authority is not inherent authority but vested authority. The church only has authority to the degree that Christ gives it and has to be exercised in accordance with Christ's commands.

1. What is church discipline?

Generally it is an aspect of discipleship. Discipling involves both training in what to do, that is, encouraging what is right and correcting what is wrong. Is it acceptable for a teacher to allow students to give wrong answers on a test and not correct them, or for a doctor to not seek to remove a cancerous tumor? No.

More specifically it is **the formal process of a church dealing with problems in its membership**. It is not punishment. It is not a power grab. It is not for personal use (guy who repeatedly threatened his children with church discipline). It is for restoration. It is like the warnings of the prophets who spoke of the captivity that was coming in order to cause people to repent. It is designed to help people. The church is messy. We are a messy bunch of sinners. We stumble. We disappoint one another. We can be prickly. That is the challenge. All followers of Christ are called to be part of a local body of believers. However, being part of a local body of believers is going to be challenging at times. So, Jesus gives us instructions on how to deal

with those challenges when they arise, because they are going to arise. How do you want to be treated when you hurt another person? How do you want to be treated when you have been misunderstood? How do you want to be treated when you have been unfairly associated with something that you had nothing to do with? Do you want people to talk about you or come to you? And when they come to you, do you want them to come in humility, hope and compassion, or do you want them to come in hostility and condemnation? Therefore, is it not loving and right for us to do the same with them?

2. Is it really loving?

We need to understand what love is. 1 John 5.3; Heb. 12.6-8 Church discipline is designed by God to be an expression of love. Love is not giving another person everything that he or she wants in the moment. Love is giving another person what he or she truly needs, even at great cost. Love is defined by God. Christ died for us. He did not give us what we wanted (military leader) but gave us what we needed (Savior).

Church membership is a formal commitment to love each other and be responsible for one another. If you go wandering off of the path of discipleship, we will come looking for you in order to get you back on track.

3. Isn't church discipline easy to abuse?

It sure is. It is also easy to ignore. Both are catastrophic for the church. So, how do we guard against the abuse of this? That is why it is so important for us to continually look at this entire text and the life of Christ. If parents discipline in anger, they will crush their children or cause the children to be angry. It is no different in the church. We are not ready to deal with problems until we have a heart that grieves over the situation, rather than just being angry or frustrated over it. Again, Christ is literally a perfect example. When he came to the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he went to the temple area and threw out the money changers. He was angry and righteously so. But he was more than angry. He was weeping and that evening, he looked over the city in an anticipation of what would happen to it and he wept. Weeping will guard us from abuse.

4. What is the result of it?

- Growth in true love by the body.
- Growth in discernment by the members.
- Growth in purity. (either through repentance or removal)
- Growth in understanding of the church of what it means to be a church

5. Which sins require discipline?

Visible, serious, unrepentant

Visible - Has to be verifiable. Cannot be based on a hunch, suspicion, etc. When something is public (visible) like a divorce, or like a trial, the church HAS to respond.

Serious – in terms of something that appears to disqualify their profession of faith (not for those prone to discouragement, or anxiety, or weakness.

Unrepentant – Refuses to turn around.

Different sinners require different responses. (1 Thess 5.14), weak, new believer, pastor? There is a difference between struggling with the bondage of a sin and being dead set on getting a divorce, no matter what. Sometimes, I need to overlook it and let love cover it. I need to let love cover the matter when the offense is not indicative of a general pattern in that person's life and is not causing harm to the fellowship. If, however, I am not able to get over the matter, then I need to talk with the person. And, by the way, you can certainly talk to another person in order to get counsel, as long as you do not reveal who the person is. (explain)

6. Does a “resignation” stop the discipline process?

How does one become a member? The answer is: by the authority of the church. So, how does one become removed from membership? The answer is: by the authority of the church.

7. How should we relate to one who has been disciplined?

- encourage them to attend church (in order to hear the gospel)
- family members should fulfill responsibilities as family members
- the type of your relationship with them changes. You are not casual with them anymore, you are intentionally calling them to follow Christ. (no longer casual, pretending to be believers) Make sure that you are identifying with them in such a way that they appear to be

Note: what does it mean “with one do not even eat?”

8. When do you restore the person?

When they repent. The prodigal son changed direction, confessed his sin and submitted himself to the Father. The scope of the restoration is going to be determined by the scope of knowledge and involvement.

9. What should we remember?¹

- Remember the gospel
- Remember the church
- Involve as few people as possible
- Let the leadership lead
- the duration is established by the length of repentance
- Give the benefit of the doubt (presume innocence)

Most discipline never reaches the elders and the congregation. The gospel rightfully understood creates a culture of humility, hope and forgiveness. (Caramel) Jesus never intended these instructions to be done apart from the life of a church where the gospel is warmly embraced and cultivated. As hurtful as it is to the church, when this teaching is ignored, it is even more hurtful when the church exercises these steps in a technical and procedural manner without compassion or care.

3 examples:

- 1) What about child abuse?
- 2) What authority does the church have over someone who is not part of the church?
- 3) What should I do when conflict arises between me and another believer who is not part of my church?

4 separate conversations about church problems this week (4 different churches), all of them relating to either abusing this text or ignoring this text. I am continually reminded of the gift that this is to the church. This is a gift to be treasured and used with great care for the beauty of the bride.

¹ Some of these points came from Jonathan Leeman's book, Church Discipline