

Our body's immune system protects us from infections and adapts throughout our lives as we are exposed to germs. [The immune system keeps a record of every germ it has ever defeated. It can recognize and destroy any bacteria or virus that attempts to overtake the body again.](#)

But some maladies prove too much for our natural immune systems. [When someone's body hosts a cancer, doctors usually operate to cut out the malignancy, and/or the patient may be prescribed a combination of chemical or radiological therapies.](#) The reason for immediate and decisive treatment is evident: [if left alone, the cancer cells will spread and grow more lethal.](#)

[Beloved, that which is true of cancer and its treatment is true of sin and church discipline](#)—a church disciplines to restore ailing members of its body to health. When the member repents, we all rejoice! But, when one remains unrepentant, the church acts to protect the rest of its body. [Sin, like cancer, must be properly diagnosed and removed so that it will not spread.](#) If we do not sever sin from ourselves, sin will sever us from God and one another.

Our loving heavenly Father exercises discipline as he raises his children. Hebrews 12:6, 11 says: *“For the Lord disciplines the one he loves...For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”* God, in his love, disciplines us for our good. This morning, we'll consider how God instructs his church to practice loving discipline for the good of the church and its members.

[Members of Christ's church are to protect, love, and restore one another.](#)

1st. Corrective Discipline for Members.

Two kinds of discipline exist: formative and corrective. *“Formative discipline”* proactively teaches, forms, and leads people to maturity in Christ. [For example, this Discipleship Seminar class represents formative discipline.](#) God uses it to prevent the sin that would require corrective discipline.

“Corrective discipline,” on the other hand, is correcting sin in a believer’s life. Members that regularly neglect their Christian duties or become guilty of conduct that renders their profession of faith doubtful may become subject to the warning or discipline of the church.

First Question: What are the goals of corrective discipline? The first reason we conduct corrective discipline is for the glory of God. The second reason is for the welfare and purity of the church (1 Cor. 5:6-7). We must protect the corporate witness of the church to the world. And it is good for Christians to see the severe nature of sin and its consequences so that they avoid it. The third reason is for the repentance, restoration, and spiritual growth of the offender (1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Cor. 2:5-8; 2 Thess. 3:14; 1 Tim. 5:20). We love offending brothers and sisters by warning and correcting their serious sin, and the wise profit from that ministry.

Second Question: What are the means of corrective discipline? First, church discipline can include a public warning or public rebuke. These call an unrepentant church member to repentance for sin too blatant to be dealt with in an exclusively private manner, or they deal with severe or heinous (think 1Cor. 5:1, 11) sin that poses a significant threat to the godliness, unity, or testimony of the church, even where there may have been repentance (1 Tim. 5:20; Titus 1:10-13) .

Second, the church may suspend a member from communion and members’ meetings for a definite period. Some members or their misconduct can become detrimental to the church's unity, holiness, and testimony that it requires some public statement along with a consequence (Rom. 16:17-20; 2 Thess. 3:6-15). In all cases of suspension, the offending person is still to be regarded as a brother or sister in Christ and a church member.

Third, we will cover deposing a leader from office this in our second point. Fourth, the church may excommunicate someone from membership. (Matt. 18:15-17; 2 Thess. 3:14-15; 1

Tim. 5:19-20; 1 Cor. 5:4-5). When they excommunicate, the church no longer considers the offender a brother but an outsider. This decision does not magically make someone an unbeliever or cause anyone to lose their salvation. *To borrow John's language, the church merely removes branches from the vine that evidently appear dead already* (Jn. 15:2, 6).

Third Question: How do we exercise church discipline? Matthew 18:15, *If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. We restore one another through private correction. Step one:* (v. 15b) *Go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.* The initiation rests with the offended party. *Why?* It's a mission to rescue a wandering sheep! Jesus' words "*go and tell*" echo the action of the shepherd who "[*goes and searches*]" for the one sheep who went astray. A wandering sheep needs a shepherd's rescue, so a sinning and straying member needs another's initiative. There might be times when an offended party may need someone to confront sin on their behalf because of the situation's complexity. Yet, ordinarily, Jesus directs the members to engage one another in love and with care.

The verb "*tell him his fault*" means to expose or convict. It suggests that the offended individual must uncover, convince, and correct the sinner of their sin. **This requirement means members should always use the Word of God and be able to clearly identify an offender's sin by it, and not just their feelings.** *For example, suppose you think a fellow church member lied to or took advantage of you financially. You should go and speak directly to that fellow member.*

Jesus commands us to refrain from talking about sin with someone else, which, unfortunately, is often our first sinful tendency. The offended party must keep the circle as small as possible, as long as possible. Galatians 6:1, "*Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.*"

Does every offense require this kind of confrontation? No. This is certain because Peter also wrote, "*Love covers a multitude of sins*" (1 Peter 4:8). Generally, we must cover minor offenses in love. Those who "*are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves*" (Rom. 15:1). However, if someone's sin continues to offend you that you may be overcome with bitterness against that member, then it may be advisable for you, with prayer, to pursue a loving rebuke and reconciliation. In these cases, it may be advisable to seek an elder's counsel about whether or how to confront. Explain your concern, but give the benefit of the doubt, and allow the other to explain. Or, sometimes, you may also correct minor offenses when it would genuinely edify and build the offender up for their ultimate and your mutual good [Matthew 18:5]. Loose or snapped strings on a stringed instrument resonate no beautiful musical notes. We need each other sometimes to securely fasten the ends.

If you do not have friends that can speak into your life right into the glove compartment of your soul, you miss out on an immense blessing of the body of Christ. One way we commune with Christ is by communing with others in Christ. Do you love other members well enough to talk to them about significant sins and to speak with them and not everyone else about their sins?

Then, consider a hypothetical positive response (v. 15c), *If he listens to you...*

Listening means the brother paid careful attention to your winsome care, agreed, and heeded your rebuke with repentance. And finally, we have reconciliation (v. 15d); *you have gained your brother*. The aim is not to hammer others about their sin but to win them over!

The second step seeks to restore an offending member with the assistance of other members. Note that the offense must be significant and outward, and the offender unrepentant, to warrant taking this step. Significant sin harms one's testimony, even calling the state of their Christianity into question. It is prone to infect the body of Christ and not merely hurts someone's

feelings. By outward sin, I mean that the sin can be seen, heard, or substantiated by investigation. We do not speculate about people's hearts or hidden offenses.

Jesus gives us a hypothetical negative response to the personal confrontation (v. 16a), *But if he does not listen...* If you remain convinced a member is sinning, this aggravates the offense and intensifies the concern. Then, Jesus supplies his people with a “step two” involving confrontation with peers (v. 16b), *take one or two others along with you...* and, finally, he provides Scriptural support for this collective action (v. 16c), *that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses*. Here Jesus invokes a courtroom principle from ancient Israel that required two or three witnesses to establish a fact or make a formal charge (see Deut. 19). These others may not have eye-witnessed the original sinful action. But they can investigate the matter and determine if the sinner remains unrepentant.

If they confirm the charge, the group confrontation helps the offended and offending party, keeping the matter objective and strengthening the appeal for them to repent. Jesus' warning sees to it that the circle of awareness about a person's sin remains small—and any witnesses called should be mature, humble believers with proven character. Often, this step involves witnesses who know the offender well (not necessarily the pastors).

After the rescue force exhausts all other options, Christ brings us to “step three:” church confrontation. They are to (v. 17b); tell *it to the church*. Typically, the pastors, functioning as overseers and witnesses, lead this process. Collectively, the church must determine whether to endorse the charge. If the church agrees, they strengthen and multiply the rescue force. The rescue party went from one member to two or three, to the entire church, from a single soldier to a small platoon to a whole unified army!

This step may sound unloving to modern ears and even embarrassing. However, love without discipline is nothing more than indulgence. God is serious about sin and not losing even one of his true sheep! The entire church turns the volume of Shepherd's voice to its highest degree, saying, "We love you. Come back to Christ." "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me."

The offense rises from a personal grievance to a concern of the whole church. The church must reach a collective judgment as to whether the offender "*listened*" to their appeal. If the offender refuses the untied petition of the church, then it brings us to "**step four:**" **excommunication of the individual from the church body.** Though difficult, this action is essential for that individual's sake and the church's protection.

Jesus presents a hypothetical negative response to "step three" of confrontation (v. 17c), *And if he refuses to listen even to the church...* Jesus assures us that the Father in heaven will guide us when we gather together in unison to confront sin in the church. **How are we assured?** v. 18-20, ²⁰*For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.* When we gather in his name to represent him and decide who represents him or not, we can be assured of Christ's presence and act according to heaven. **That's why Baptist Theologian John L. Dagg said, "When discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it."**

Without repentance, Jesus commands, not advises, "Step four:" excommunication (v. 17d), *let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.* Notice how Jesus no longer names the offender as a "brother" but calls him "*a Gentile and a tax collector.*" When they excommunicate, the church no longer considers the offender a brother but an outsider. **The offended party should no longer engage in table fellowship (casual eating) with the person, and interactions with the offending party, generally speaking, should be limited.**

Sometimes the sin is so heinous and publicly known that the church should move very quickly to move someone outside their fellowship. 1 Cor. 5:1-2, 4-5, *It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you... When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.*"

Sin is like a virus on your computer; only in your soul. Once the computer is infected, the virus copies itself onto every software program it can. Unchecked, sin can spread in a church in just that manner. Excommunication, however painful, effectively eradicates the virus. It is the surgical procedure to remove the cancerous mass and the Biblically preventive defense as an antibody against any subsequent similar infection.

Members of Christ's church are to protect, love, and restore one another. Christ intimately binds GRBC together so that we all are lovingly responsible for one another. May you engage in God's rescue mission and develop closer personal relationships within the body.

2nd. Corrective Discipline for Leaders.

What do you do when you have concerns regarding an officer of the church? We should handle most concerns according to our Lord's instructions in Matt. 18:15-17 and 1 Tim. 5:19-21. However, a person should report any serious or blatant sin (think 1Cor. 5:1, 11), scandalous behavior, substantial doctrinal error, or illegal activity by any officer or to the entire eldership, notwithstanding private confrontation or repentance (for example, if an elder is guilty of embezzlement, one should notify the church irrespective of repentance or personal

confrontation). Furthermore, a person should report any suspected abuse or neglect of a minor to the appropriate civil authorities first and immediately.

Paul says in 1 Timothy 5:19-21, *Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.*

Paul protects elders from spurious attacks and unfounded accusations. The church cannot accept a charge against an elder as true except by admission or on the evidence of at least two or three confirming witnesses. The church should dismiss unsubstantiated claims.

If a member has an objective concern, they should first address that officer privately (There might be times when may need to speak to a different leader, God forbid, because of wicked intimidation or abuse of a leader). If their concerns continue, they should bring their concerns to the (other) blameless elders (see 1 Tim. 5:21) or deacons if there are no (other) elders. The church must act without prejudging without evidence or showing partiality towards a favored elder. If necessary, the members may seek to call a special meeting per Article 5.3.6 (which requires 25% of the membership to sign off). **Recall that, to warrant this step, the offense must be significant and outward, but not necessarily unrepentant** (Again, and elder may repent of embezzling but his sin still requires public disclosure).

Our Constitution stipulates that, in some cases, a leave of absence (for paid staff) may be necessary until the internal or independent investigation is completed. The Constitution requires a leave of absence for criminal investigations.

An officer's sin causes great harm to the church. Verified, serious, blatant, and possibly unresolved charges subject the elder to disciplinary action. Each leader is under the

oversight of their (fellow) elders and is subject to the same rules of discipline as all the church members. **In addition, they are subject to public reprimand for serious and blatant sins** (Gal. 2:14; 1 Tim. 5:20) and may be removed from office (1 Tim. 3:1), **potentially even where there may have been repentance** (e.g., **embezzling**). So, even in cases of repentance, the church deals with an elder's serious sins more publicly. A three-fourths vote of members can immediately dismiss a disqualified officer. If the officer is unrepentant, the church shall also pursue church discipline.

Conclusion.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:13, *"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet."* **Church discipline spurs its members toward perseverance in hope, keeps the church distinct from the world, and maintains our compelling witness.**