

Transcript 138

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. Today we're going to be tackling an issue that we do receive questions about fairly often, but it's something that most churches and pastors church leaders hope to never have to do, and yet there is very explicit instructions in scripture about it. Today's podcast we're going to be talking about church discipline.

Shea Houdmann

Now the main passage for church discipline is Matthew Chapter 18, verses 15 through 17, and also 18 to 20, which we'll cover a little bit later, but let me just go ahead and read the passage just to get us started. Matthew 18 Verse 15 if your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over, but if they will not listen, take one or two others along so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church. And if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. And so this this verse, this passage in Matthew, there's some other passages elsewhere in the New Testament that kind of helped to clarify how this is done. Kind of gives that outline both for church discipline and it's often applied and interpersonal relationships. That if your brother sister in Christ sins against you, first talk to them privately. If that doesn't result in repentance, take someone with you. Then the church discipline is a little more formal, and but if a member of the church is involved in sin is not responding to a personal and hopefully loving confrontation, then he's bringing to the whole church.

Shea Houdmann

And the whole goal of the process, whether it's interpersonal or whether it's entire church is repentance. It's not to bring condemnation, it's to hopefully point out the person the error of their ways and to point them towards how they should be living in contrast to what they're currently doing. So that's that's the goal of the process. Several steps. The steps should be followed in their biblical order. And again the goal is repentance. The goal is not to destroy someone's reputation. The goal is not to condemn someone so harshly that they feel they can never be of use to Christ again. The goal is repentance and restoration.

Jeff Laird

A lot of people get confused about the exact purposes behind church discipline. It's good that we bring up the idea that the point of it is supposed to be repentance. We're we're called on all these times in the Bible to pursue unity. That we're supposed to be together as much as we can be. And if we don't approach conflict and disagreement the right way, that's not going to happen. One of the things you see in this process for church discipline is that it starts with the most private conversation possible. If you have a problem with somebody, the best thing to do is to go communicate with that person, just you and them. Not gossip about it. Not complain about it. Not whine about it to a dozen other people. You go talk to that person 1st and then it escalates from there. One of the things that's really interesting about that is that that doesn't just provide the opportunity for someone who is potentially sinning to be

confronted and hopefully repent when it's a personal conversation or when they're approached by several people in the church.

Jeff Laird

But those steps also provide an opportunity for something almost like a due process. If I go talk to somebody and say, hey, I have a problem with this or that thing that you're doing, they may wind up telling me something that changes my mind. And now this this conflict instead of me spreading false rumors about them, well, now we've settled it. Now I understand. OK, I was wrong about that. Maybe two of us go to talk to each other and we just can't resolve this this disagreement, this feeling that somebody's sinning or somebody's doing harm. When you take it to a small group of people you have the same opportunity. Now you bring people in from outside the circumstances who can sort of look at it, and there's a chance for those people to say, you know what Jeff you're really making a bigger deal about this than you need to. This does not need to be escalated. Or you're right. This is something that we need to work with and deal with. So the the purpose of all this is not to crush somebody, or to slam down on somebody or or just do everything that we can to skip to the part where we get to throw them out in the wilderness. The point of all of it is to seek unity and reconciliation and to do it in a way that doesn't create more drama and division than it absolutely has to.

Kevin Stone

Exactly Jeff and you know, church discipline is a difficult thing, but it is commanded in Scripture. And churches every church needs to have be taking this seriously. If if a church is serious about actually disciplining people, they have to be practicing church discipline because discipline is part of discipleship. You know, we all have rough edges. We all have things that we need to work on and we all have blind spots that you know we need to have people coming to us at times and say hey, you know I noticed this in your life. And can I can I help you through this? Can we work on this together? Is there a way that we can correct this? This sinful behavior is what church discipline is aimed at.

Kevin Stone

But I I'm struck by Jesus instructions in Matthew 18. That passage that you read, Shea, how there are built in safeguards. And Jeff, you were talking about about those. About their. I mean, it's possible that the person who's making the accusation doesn't have all the facts and needs to be corrected. And so the process allows for that to be corrected. The process that Jesus describes there in Matthew 18 also has some built-in protections of privacy. You know, the very first step is that you go one-on-one, and you know that's as far as it goes at the beginning, unless things escalate because of a refusal to repent. You know the digging in of the heels and the the hard, the stiff necked or the hard heart that we sometimes run into. But I have to say as a pastor and in our church, when we've practiced church discipline, I've only ever had to get to the first step. And the one-on-one conversation has had good results. And it never had to go further than that. Now that's not the case in many churches I understand, and I believe that I I'm very blessed and I thank God every day for the church that I'm pastoring. But in my particular case, that has taken care of it. And when that happens, the one-on-one conversation takes place and then there's a resolution, nobody else even has to know about it. So that's a that's a beautiful thing. You may be saying you know my church doesn't practice church discipline and well, that may be true, and maybe they need to start practicing church discipline, but it also could be true that your church is practicing church discipline and you just never hear about it because things are handled privately. And

things are handled just through step one. And that's that's the situation that I see in my church. And it's a it's a good thing to be following the biblical principles.

Shea Houdmann

Talking to pastors and even questions that we've received from pastors or from people who are involved in church discipline or have had loved ones go through church discipline, there are some aspects of it that in our modern context are more difficult to apply. For example, in most of the New Testament letters written to individual churches, if a sinning believer who is unrepentant, refused to turn back to the Lord, was in the sense ex commuted, excommunicated forced to no longer attend the church. There's no other church for them to go to. In our modern context, in most cities, especially larger cities, there would literally be hundreds of churches to choose from. So you can be disciplined to the point of being forced to leave a church, and there's a church, two blocks down that you can attend. So some churches tend to like avoid the church discipline thing. Well, they're just going to go somewhere else anyway, so what's the point?

Shea Houdmann

Or I also have heard from pastors, church leaders who for a very biblical reason have tried to initiate church discipline only to have some people in the church revolt against it to the point of, like you're making, so what if my daughter who serves on the worship team is living with her boyfriend and engaging in sexual immorality and what gives you the right to say that that's wrong? To the point where a pastor who was forced to leave for confronting essentially, someone who happened to be in one of the powerful families in the church. So I I totally get it though, a lot of pastors will tend to avoid church discipline. For one, they're not sure it'll do any good and two, they don't want to stir up dissension. They don't want to have to come back and bite them for trying to do something biblical.

Shea Houdmann

But again, this is something the Bible commands. It gives us very clear outlines of here are the steps to take and we should take them in those steps. For me, if the my one confusion or lack of clarity on this issue is what sins rise to the level of needing church discipline? Like if someone has a sinned, which we all do all the time, but at what point is it a big enough sin? I've been hesitate to use that language that it needs to be a personal confrontation or then a group of people are then brought before the whole church? Maybe I wish there was a little more clarity in this is OK what exactly are we talking about? What specific sins do we need to confront in this way? But it's not. So I think it becomes a matter of discernment for churches and church leaders, for pastors, a quote on quote small sin in one situation would not rise to this, but perhaps in another would so. Even in this while we have clear instructions of how to handle it, what exactly is being handled? I think there's some discernment involved when a confrontation is necessary or when this is a matter. This is just something that's a matter of spiritual growth and discipleship.

Kevin Stone

I think discernment is necessary always, but I and I think going to what going along with what you said, Shea, we need to be careful that we are only calling sin what scripture calls sin. We're not talking about pet peeves or, you know, things that you just rub me the wrong way and I'm going to go take care of this issue. It's stuff that the Scripture actually identifies as sinful. Those are the issues that we need to be

addressing. Also, I think when we we start the process with that one-on-one conversation, it needs to be in cases where that seems to be a true blind spot. It's not somebody who's just struggling with with a sin and, you know, confesses it and tries to forsake it. And all of that. But it's somebody who persists in this behavior and seems to not even be aware of it possibly or or doesn't care that it's hurting other people. And those are the cases that we need to be pursuing.

Jeff Laird

It's really important to remember that the purpose of church discipline, if you watch the way that that proceeds, every step in the process assumes that somebody involved is refusing to accept repentance and accountability for something that's going on. That the point of church discipline is not to prosecute a trial with the end goal being excommunication. Hey, we proved that this guy did this sin, so let's kick him out of the church. If somebody says you know what you're right, this is something that I shouldn't do or I should not have done. I'm willing to accept accountability. I do think that this is something I need to fix. Then that that's how Christian life is supposed to work. You know none of us are going to be perfect. If all we just do is prosecute when we make mistakes then we're all going to be out in no time. The point of it is to look for opportunities for reconciliation, for repentance. Restoring somebody in a spirit of gentleness. And that sort of thing. It's not just about determining was there a sin, it's what are we going to do about that sin?

Kevin Stone

And that verse that you just alluded to Jeff is Galatians 6 verse one which says brothers and sisters if if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the spirit should restore that person gently. And there's that word gently. But watch yourselves, or you may be also tempted. So through it all, this process has to be filled with grace. And grace, and kindness, and unconditional love, should not be an afterthought in this process. It should be the first thought as we have that goal of restoration and seek to do what is best for this erring brother or sister in Christ.

Jeff Laird

Now to Shea, what you were saying, I think that there's I think there's a a sense in which we can sort of say that this church discipline, we refer to this as the church discipline process but I think it's really a little bit broader even than that, because it really is just sort of the the church conflict or church disagreement process. I think it's fair for us to say that if we're not sure what to do, this is the model that we go to. As long as we're starting with that humble, sincere, one-on-one approach that says look, I feel convicted that I need to approach you about this and say something about this. Those give us the opportunity to say what does scripture say? What's really happening? What's going on here, and that's where we get the chance to sort of go through and determine, even if it is something that's ultimately just trivial. Well then we're handling our trivial disagreement in a, you know, a civil personal together sort of a matter. I think that that's where our discernment comes in is that when we start to get to that level of OK, now we're going to take it to a group. You know that's a chance for the group to say I don't know that this rises to the level of discipline. I know you don't like the bumper sticker on their car, but I don't see that that's got anything to do with this and so on and so forth so. So I think it's handy that we don't necessarily have to ask like do I use this process or do I not use this process? All we sort of have to do is say this is the process we're going to use and then we go through and just determine whether it needs to continue or whether it can stop.

Shea Houdmann

Jeff, that's a, that's a great point. And I've seen some like employer handbooks, a policy very similar to what Matthew 18 describes in terms of even that conflicts in the workplace. How to handle disagreements. So you know these principles apply to many situations beyond just a formal church discipline type of process. Because I mean, ultimately, if your goal is restoration, forgiveness, so forth. These are the steps to take. If you you want to nuke your relationship with the person well, jump straight to broadcasting it to everyone and focus on condemnation. I mean. But if the goal is what Christ is talking about here to lead a believer from embracing sin to rejecting sin, these are the steps that should be followed.

Jeff Laird

I like that you bring up the idea of a goal. That there's there's a point and a purpose behind the rules. There's advantages to the process, but those are a little bit different than the goal. The purpose. Why are we doing this the way that we're doing it? And the ultimate purpose of this is to make disciples. It's to make people more Christ like. And the first step in that is hopefully gonna deal with that right then and there. But all of the steps in there are meant to have those different purposes. First and foremost is to disciple, is to help people overcome sin. Is to hold people accountable so we actually do grow. We actually do change. And I agree with what both Shea and you Kevin are saying is that this is necessary. You cannot, not sometimes have confrontation about these things because we're not perfect.

Jeff Laird

But the process is also meant to protect other people in the church, not just the one who's being confronted. We don't want sin to become so accepted, so ignored that it becomes imitated in the church. We don't want to have something going on that we're afraid to speak on or speak about. And then it just becomes a trend. It becomes a habit and nobody wants to confront. And worst of all, we don't want the way we as a church act, think, speak to provide the wrong impression to the world. The the first Corinthians Chapter 5 has an example where Paul talks about somebody who's doing something so heinous that he basically says look, even the pagans know that that's gross. And that's a problem. If the church is participating in things that even a sinful culture knows are not right then it's not even just that we're weakening the witness that we have of who Christ is and what he means. But we're we're almost lying to the world about what it means to be a follower of Christ. So the fact that these are commands is important for those reasons for the individual, for the church within the church, and for how the church can witness to and help the world.

Kevin Stone

If I may, I'd like to share another passage that I think deals with church discipline and that's math. Sorry James Chapter 5 verses 19 and 20. My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this, whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins. And so James just gives the encouragement that if you're involved in this process and your goal is to turn this erring brother or sister back to the truth, then you are doing a very good thing. You're acting in love, which covers over a multitude of sins. And you're saving this person from possible destruction down the road.

Kevin Stone

I like old Westerns and one of the tropes of that genre is the runaway Stagecoach or sometimes just a runaway horse. But you know so often there's this Stagecoach that for one reason or another has lost its driver. He's fallen off the bench there and this Stagecoach is going down the path pell mell and the horses are galloping along. And of course, there's this damsel in distress that's in the coach. And she's crying out for help. But not to worry because there is a cowboy coming. And he's riding a very fast steed and he comes up alongside the team of horses and he jumps off his horse onto the backs of this team of horses. Clammers his way up to the front horses and turns that this is what's important. He turns them off the path that they were going and brings them to a stop. Then of course, when everything is calmed down, he goes back to the coach. He opens the door, saves the girl and all is well. I love old westerns, but I think that's kind of what James is talking about in a way. We need somebody to come alongside and an errant brother or sister and turned them from the path that they were going. I mean, there's there's a cliff down this path at the end of this. You don't want to go this way. Turn them out of that way into the safe way. Pull back on the reins and slow things down. Let's hold our horses. And let's let's get to a safe spot. And James says, when you're able to come alongside and guide somebody back into the path of safety and truth, then that is a very good thing and it's blessed.

Jeff Laird

It's also good for us to remember that the purpose of going through that is to we're we're trying to help that person to not wreck themselves. We're trying not to get the damsel in distress, run over. We're not. We don't want them to hurt other people. I think we also need to remember that sometimes people get confused about the concept of church discipline and they think that the point of church discipline is that no matter what the sin is and no matter what happens, it's, it's all just supposed to be handled completely within the church. And granted, we've been talking about how important discretion and privacy are when they're possible, because we don't want to spread false rumors. But we also need to remember that repentance includes things like accountability. And nothing in the church discipline process suggests at all that there aren't going to be civil consequences sometimes for some of the things that are happening. There's a difference between me confronting somebody and saying, hey, I think that you are you're you're you're speaking inappropriately with someone who's not your wife. That is what it is. It's another thing if I say, hey, I think that you're you're you're maybe doing something inappropriate with a minor, or that you're, you're committing some sort of abuse or crime or something like that. Nothing in the church discipline process precludes Christians from properly using government for the authority that God intended it to be used for. And what we don't want to do is we don't want to let people sort of say oh, we're handling this through church discipline. It's not an either or. It's a both, and. Church discipline involves how we, as Christian believers are going to interact with others who claim to be Christians. But in order for somebody to actually repent and accept accountability that can and usually does mean if this is a crime, that person needs to accept accountability for that crime. So it's it's a nuance that we want to make sure that we at least establish so that people aren't confused with that idea of thinking that, well, we're supposed to keep this private. We're supposed to cover something up. It's not about covering anything up. It's about making sure that we're going through the procedure the right way. And absolutely accountability includes civil authorities if it rises to that level.

Shea Houdmann

Jeff that a excellent point and I just remember in the past. Oh, time frame doesn't matter. There are many instances of churches handling something in house that should have been reported to the authorities and the damage it reeks later it's far worse then it looks like the church is trying to cover something up. So yeah, the church discipline process is not meant to cover up crimes or to protect people from the civil consequences of the actions they've taken. Sometimes the best thing a church can do, and the course the since God calls us to the things that the church should do if a crime is committed is to report that to the appropriate authorities. Even if the person has fully repented and gone through the full restoration process. That does not alleviate them from the consequences of their action. So thank you for bringing that up. That's very important.

Shea Houdmann

If I were to think of one other point, I would really like to bring up is that church discipline is not just for church leaders to take congregants or church members through. The same principles principles also apply to church leaders that point to the language in First Timothy chapter. 5 verses 19 to 20 which says do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it's brought by again two or three witnesses using the same terminology. But those elders who are sinning, you are to reprove before everyone, so that others may take warning. So it's used as a lot of the same language that we see in Matthew 18, and even the case of an elder or pastor, the goal is restoration. And several times prominent church leaders have done something that resulted in going through the church discipline process. And I have heard people who are in the church who not the best word to use but like a fan of the pastor to the point of why are we being so unloving to them when they're going through a tough time and those sorts of things. That to me, every time I hear that takes my mind back to Hebrews 12 and the verses are actually a quote of proverbs chapter 3 says my son do not make light of the Lord's discipline and do not lose heart when he rebukes you. Because the Lord disciplines the one he loves and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son. Whether it's church discipline, whether it's parental discipline, whether it's discipline directly from God, it should be done in the spirit of love. And seeking to restore someone is an an act of love. Seeking to help someone to see the error of their ways. To point out a blind spot. A sin that is in their life that they are enslaved to is an act of love. And so keeping that in mind throughout the whole church disciplined process that the motivation should be love. The end result should be repentance and restoration, gives the whole church to some of us. It's a whole different perspective, so our attitude in how we go about church discipline is as important as following the precise steps that are laid out in Scripture.

Jeff Laird

It's also interesting when we look at the the context of what goes on there. It's very important that we use this unified approach. And I know Shea, you've made comment before about how you find some irony in that there's there's this description of the church disciplinary process that you read, and what comes immediately after that are words that are really, really important for this process. And they're they're very often just pulled out of context and applied in situations where they don't mean anything like what people are trying to use them for. What's your take on that?

Shea Houdmann

Yeah, so in the Matthew 18 passage, very next verse after what I read earlier is whatever you have bound on earth will be bound in heaven. Whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven.

And then the next verse after that is the for wherever two or three witnesses are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them. The binding and loosing verse I hear quoted all the time about I'm binding this demon. I'm binding this, preventing this bad event from happening. I'm loosing God's blessings and it's not at all what they're just talking about. And that where two or three are gathered is usually quoted in the context of prayer. OK, let's gather two or three of us together, and let's all pray for the same thing. And God is especially going to be with us during that time. And I'm not saying there's an absence of truth in that concept. But both of those passages are directly connected to church discipline. Saying that God is, if we're following the biblical principles of church discipline, God is with us in that process and he's in, He's in agreement with us when we are confronting a believer in the spirit of love with the goal of restoration. And the two or three witnesses in the passage about take two or three with you, and then two verses later talking about they're two or three there, I'm in the midst saying God is with us throughout this church discipline process.

Shea Houdmann

So this is a powerful reminder of that, when God has ordained a process like this, if we are following the biblical steps he is with us, he is guiding us. He is working in that process and ultimately he is the one who has to bring about the repentance. He is the one who has to change a person's heart about the sins they are committing. So participating with God. Allowing God's word to guide and inform the whole process is crucial. and taking these things out of context to me it's more of an annoyance than anything else, and I'm not saying these verses don't have any application outside of the church discipline process, but it's always, and we did a podcast about this not too long ago about taking verses out of context, and I can't remember if we discussed this one. But keeping versus in our context is crucial because we don't want to make them say what they don't say, but we do want them to inform what that the context they're actually found in. And these two verses applying to church discipline gives you a whole different perspective on how the process will work and who's in charge of it, namely God.

Shea Houdmann

Hope our conversation today on church discipline has been informative to you. Hope you after listening or watching this episode, walk away from it with a greater understanding of what church discipline is and what church discipline isn't. Each of us to varying degrees, have had to engage in church discipline with a believer whose sinning and to varying degrees, we've seen repentance happen. We've seen people just walk out and leave the church. Obviously, our goal should always be restoration, confrontation, and love. Of victory over sin rather than condemnation. So hope you hear that spirit with us today. Not a fun topic to talk about, but something we're asked about fairly often and something that is not applied in churches as often as it should be. This has been the Got Questions podcast on church discipline with Jeff, the Administrator of BibleRef.com and Kevin, the managing editor of Got Questions Ministries. Got questions? The Bible has answers. We'll help you find them.