

02.13.11 / Matthew 18:15-20**Passage Insight**

At the heart of this passage is an exhibition of love, for God, who is love itself, disciplines those He loves for the sake of literally providing a share in His own holiness (Hebrews 12:10). When we are in Christ, we are made righteous by the blood of Christ, and we are made more holy, as God is holy, through discipline. Therefore, discipline makes us more like Jesus, and so, while it may be unpleasant at the time, it is in reality an act of God's mercy toward us, as it not only frees us from the bondage of sin, but it also grants us the very real gift of being like God Himself. Praise God.

The passage begins with the assumption that members of the body will sometimes sin against one another. Despite our salvation, we live in a broken world, and our process of sanctification is just that, a process. As such, we can expect both to sin and be sinned against within the body of Christ. Our Lord knew this would happen, and He graciously and lovingly provides us with a system for dealing with this, a system that is entirely motivated out of love for one another.

The first step when we are sinned against is to approach the other person privately. This does several things. First, it preserves the dignity of the other person, who may or not be guilty of the supposed sin. How many times have we operated under incorrect assumptions or draw incorrect conclusions, only to later discover that either our information or interpretation was wrong. Approaching someone in private allows for the maintenance of dignity and opportunity to gain clarity where things may in fact be unclear.

If your brother or sister in Christ listens and repents, you have gained him or her. Again, how does this happen? By demonstrating respect, preserving dignity, and most of all, by approaching them in genuine love, not allowing this person that you love to persist in their sin. Maybe they're totally unaware of it, maybe they think they're doing something good and right, or maybe they know they're sinning against you but somehow feel powerless to avoid it and need the very courage you breathe into them upon reminding them who they really are in Christ Jesus. The very act of approaching someone who is in sin and confronting him/her with the truth can be a beautiful act of love. Let us now explore even more deeply the approach to such a situation.

We should no doubt lead with grace when confronting one another. We should lead with grace, expecting repentance, and be ourselves exceedingly willing to extend forgiveness and grace where there is sin. Failing to do so is likely the result of a failure to recognize our own need for grace. Numbers 15:22 speaks of sins of ignorance – perhaps the person doesn't even know they're in sin. David prayed in Psalm 19:12 to be freed from secret faults – maybe your confrontation in love will be a catalyst on the road to freedom from a sin to which your brother or sister has been blinded for some time.

Ephesians 4:15 tells us to speak the truth in love, and so we would be wise to always check our hearts before opening our mouths. Are we confronting out of love, or the desire to get even and see someone punished? Are we confronting out of love for the other person, or simply self-centered affection for ourselves? If we speak the truth in love, considering the genuine needs and well being of our brother or sister in Christ, we will show ourselves to be faithful to the ways of Christ. Finally, on the topic of delivery, it should be mentioned that a soft word turns away wrath (Proverbs 15:1).

Discipline does not exist as a way to get even or to make sure people “get their due” or as a form of penance. All punishment and penance and sacrifice were necessarily handled at the cross by Jesus, and it’s not our responsibility in administering discipline to pour out wrath on those whom we’re disciplining. The wrath for the sin in question was already poured out onto Christ on the cross. Our goal in Christian discipline is instead to drive one another to repentance. We seek in administering discipline to “win” one another back to the right action of dying to self to love, serve, and willingly submit to one another. In Christian discipline we seek to keep one another from continuing in sin. On the topic of winning, may we not seek to win an argument or simply be right and assert our position, but rather seek to win our brothers and sisters within the body of Christ who have sinned against us. It is entirely possible to win an argument but lose our brother or sister (father, mother, child, spouse) in the process. Finally, as we see in Ephesians 5:18-21, it is our being filled with the Holy Spirit that allows us to enter into relationships with the willingness to submit to one another.

When a confronted brother or sister is approached by the church family and still does not repent from the sin, it can be appropriate to treat a member of the body of Christ as an outsider, removing them from the fellowship of the body, for by being treated as something other than a member of the body of Christ, those who persist in their sin will have the capacity to see the utter hopelessness of their actions, the despondency of their deeds, the unfruitfulness of their choices, and in seeing this desolation, will desire to return to the place of hope, the body of Christ, where they are loved, pursued, cared for, have their needs met, and are offered true and lasting forgiveness.

As we see in verses 19-20, we are to gather as brothers and sisters in prayer throughout the discipline process. We are not to enter into discipline of our own motives or power, but rather guided by the Holy Spirit. As the process of discipline moves through the progression of 2 people to 3 people to the church, it remains very important to pray to the Father for guidance. The power and presence of Christ with us when we gather should not be lost on us as we focus on building community, and it is Christ’s power and presence that allows us to bind (permit) and loose (allow) as we consider those in the body who are in sin.

Finally, we should take note of the verses that immediately precede today’s passage. Matthew 18:12-14 says this:

What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

Our Father in Heaven loves us enough to pursue us, and faithful, honest discipline is a vehicle for such pursuit, that we may be reminded of the truth and restored to a proper relationship the Father. To apply Godly discipline within the body of Christ is to love one another.

In short, we must be exceedingly gracious and forgiving, motivated by love and love alone when we enter into discipline of those in the body of Christ. We must be intent on seeing them freed from the burden of sin so that they may worship the Lord unfettered, be made more holy, and in this, point others to Christ as has been done for them.

Application Questions / Prayer

Leading with Grace / Willingness to Forgive

- 1) Share a time when you approached someone ungraciously rather than leading with grace?
- 2) How did they take your confrontation, and what was the outcome?

- 3) Where do you often fail to see your own need for grace (you may need others' help with this...)?
- 4) How would a recognition of your need for grace change the way you approach others in your group?
- 5) How will this recognition of everyone's need for grace drive you to share the gospel with those who don't yet know Jesus?

Motivated by Love

- 1) How have you mistakenly seen God as something other than loving in moments of discipline?
- 2) Christ died for you because He loves you. The Lord disciplines you because He loves you. It is love that motivates this correction. If you were to receive discipline at the hands of someone in your group, what would it look like for that discipline to be motivated by love?
- 3) If you know of someone in your group whom you need to confront where there is sin, whether against you or against someone else, ask the Lord to help you recognize your own need for grace, and ask Him to show you where love is not your motivation. Then ask Him to show you what it looks like to discipline in love.

Disciplined for Holiness

- 1) How have you rejected discipline in the past?
- 2) When we are disciplined, and we respond with humility and repentance, we gain a share in the holiness of the Lord. We are made more like Him. How does this truth change the way you think about discipline?
- 3) Are your eyes now opened to sin in your life that has remained hidden until now?
- 4) If someone in your group were to confront you on this sin, how would you respond knowing that the Lord intends to use it to give you more of His own holiness?

Sources

- Prayer
- Bible Exposition Commentary
- Bible Knowledge Commentary
- The Bible Reader's Companion