



Course Name: Shepherds/Elders (Discipline)

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Course description:

The task of discipline is not an easy one. Elders/shepherds are faced with determining how to discipline, what areas require discipline, when to discipline, and working through the effects of that discipline on the congregation. This lesson presents material to help guide the process in studying what scripture says about discipline, the purposes of discipline, and the environment of discipline.

Course Objectives: By the end of this class students will have...

- A. Studied the biblical context of discipline and what it means for the church today.
- B. Explored the purpose and benefit of discipline.
- C. Created an environment in which discipline is meaningful.

Outline of the class:

- A. During the first few minutes of the class divide the class into groups of three or four. Then ask each table to take 15-20 minutes to discuss the following.
 1. How do you define the word discipline?
 2. List out circumstances you believe require discipline and how to implement that discipline in the church context.
 3. Read together 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 4:2 and consider how this aligns with discipline.
- B. Definitions
 1. The word “discipline” is related to “disciple,” and refers to all that is involved in becoming an effective follower of Jesus.
 2. Broadly speaking, “Church Discipline” refers to everything that we do in the church to help one another serve Christ and reach heaven (Note: The term “church discipline” does not occur in Scripture but is a convenient way of referring to a large area of biblical teaching and Christian practice).

*Church discipline includes teaching, encouragement, guidance, exhortation, etc., all of which may be thought of as “instructive” discipline.

**“Corrective” discipline refers to the actions that we are to take when someone refuses to conform his/her life to clear biblical teaching. It, too, can take a variety of forms, such as rebuke, correction, warning, and its most extreme form, the withdrawal of fellowship.

*This study will focus primarily on “corrective” congregational discipline and on New Testament texts that instruct the church as a whole to take some sort of corrective action on behalf of an offending brother or sister.

C. Texts which teach Discipline: Divide these up among the small groups. Have each read their specific texts and list the form a discipline found in their passages. Then share with the class and discuss.

1. Matthew 18:15-17
2. Galatians 6:1
3. 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15
4. 1 Corinthians 5:1-8
5. 2 Corinthians 2:5-11
6. 3 John 5-11
7. Titus 3:10-11
8. Romans 16:17-18
9. 1 Timothy 1:3-4, 18-20
10. 2 Timothy 2:24-26
11. Hebrews 12:14-16
12. Note: There are at least as many texts teaching the necessity of *discipline* as there are teaching the necessity of *baptism*, yet we have typically neglected the one and insisted on the other. It is evident that discipline was part of the everyday life of the early church, which suggests that it should be part of the life of the church today.

D. Purposes of Discipline: A survey of the texts listed above reveals that corrective discipline has a variety of purpose. These can be categorized under two broad headings.

1. *For the benefit of the one sinning:* Hopefully, the rebuke, correction, exhortation, and withholding of fellowship will cause a sinning brother or sister to realize the seriousness of their spiritual condition and repent, rather than being lost.
2. *For the benefit of the church:* Discipline is intended to prevent the example and influence of an undisciplined member from infecting others. “A little leaven leavens the whole lump” (1 Corinthians 5:6). Likewise, it strengthens the church’s witness as a body of believers who take sin seriously, and helps the church maintain its holiness, “without which no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14). In the case of false teachers and/or divisive people, it prevents misguided individuals from negatively affecting the whole church.

NOTE: In all cases, the New Testament makes it clear that the intent of disciplinary action is *positive* and aimed toward *salvation*, rather than being punitive in nature. Disciplinary actions are not done “to” people, but “for” them. The hope is always toward regaining an erring brother or sister, or failing that, to protect the church from harm.

- E. The Environment of Discipline: Discipline, the Bible makes clear, is not a series of isolated acts. Rather it arises out of a specific congregational understanding and context. When this context is missing, discipline either will not occur, or else it will not have the desired effect. *We cannot think of discipline until we have first created an environment in which it will be meaningful.* Here are some of the necessary elements of that environment.
1. *A desire to reflect the holiness of God* (Hebrews 12:1-17)
 - a. Vv. 9-10 God disciplines us because He loves us, so that we can “share His holiness.” Holiness does not come “naturally” to any of us.
 - b. We are to discipline one another for the same reason, in order to *maintain* holiness. See vv. 14-15, where the discussion becomes communal: “See to it” is from the same verb (*spiskopeo*) as the New Testament word for “overseer” or “bishop”; i.e., we are to “oversee” one another.
 2. *Faith in God’s word – that discipline is both right and effective*
 - a. Some object that discipline is “unloving.” It is no more unloving for us to discipline one another than it is for God to discipline us!
 - b. When we say that what God commands is “unloving,” we are suggesting that we know how to love better than God does!
 - c. We must have sufficient confidence in Scripture to believe what it says about discipline.
 3. *Genuine love for one another*
 - a. Can we honestly say that we love one another if we fail to do all we can when someone’s spiritual life is in danger?
 - b. On the other hand, if we truly love, discipline will follow naturally.
 4. *Real Fellowship*
 - a. Not just meals and parties, but fellowship in the spiritual business of serving God together, and of helping one another grow in Christ.
 - b. Outside the context of genuine fellowship, discipline is both pointless and destructive. But in a context of real fellowship, it becomes an expression of the fellowship itself. In a sense, it is the “ultimate expression of fellowship.”
 5. *Pastoral leadership*
 - a. Churches will generally do what they are *led* to do. If shepherds/elders do not oversee spiritually, discipline will not occur. If they do, it will. Discipline is not their sole responsibility, but their leadership is vital. Being “shepherds” involves doing whatever it takes to reclaim lost sheep.
 - b. Hebrews 13:17

Conclusion:

- A. Discipline is necessary, both biblically and practically, for the good of the church. It is a gift that God has provided for the good spiritual health of the entire body. To neglect discipline is to allow the body to become sickened, and some of its members to die.
- B. The path of exercising or practicing discipline can be difficult. We must remember that all discipline is not punitive. Rather, we learn that through teaching, encouragement, guidance, exhortation, etc., we find “instructive” discipline. “Corrective” discipline is more of a last effort when someone refuses to conform to biblical teaching.
- C. Take time to study through the passages on discipline, specifically Matthew 18:15-17 and note the following steps.
 - 1. First, go to a brother or sister personally (and privately) and try to work through the issue or sin.
 - 2. Second, if that does not work, then take one or two others to discuss the situation further. The purpose is to resolve the sinful circumstance or restoration of the relationship.
 - 3. Third, if that does not work, then the church as a whole should be told. **BUT** this is not the final step.
 - 4. The fourth step is for the whole church to go to the individual. The text says, “If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matthew 18:17). To miss this final step is to miss the opportunity to follow the instructions of our Lord.

NOTE: Imagine the impact when the whole congregation goes together and appeals to the individual. Remember, the purpose is about reconciliation/restoration. When this is the priority, our approach will reflect it.