

[Does God Like Me?](https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/does-god-like-me) | [Go Multiply](https://discipleship.org/blog/go-multiply/) | [Finding Faith For Myself](http://www.roomfordoubt.com/examine/3/Finding-Faith-for-Myself)

Church Discipline

It would be fair to say that church discipline is not a major issue today for most Christian groups. In fact, most denominations have “solved” the problem of church discipline: They do not do it at all! For the great majority of churches today, premarital sex is advised against, but it is not really a fellowship issue. Drunkenness is strongly discouraged, and help for those who are addicted to drugs and alcohol is available within the church. This is a good thing, of course. However those who “struggle” with drunkenness are not in any danger of being disciplined by church leaders. Some openly accept those who engage in homosexual relations. Others teach that it is the most heinous of sins. What few will do is exercise church discipline in the way prescribed in the New Testament for sins such as greed, sexual immorality, financial impropriety, drug addiction and the like (1 Corinthians 5:11).

[Since Jesus said anyone having a vision of Jesus coming back is having a false vision, does this mean that Paul was a false apostle?](http://evidenceforchristianity.org/since-jesus-said-anyone-having-a-vision-of-jesus-coming-back-is-having-a-false-vision-does-this-mean-that-paul-was-a-false-apostle/)

[The Bible says that God does not change, but the God of the Old Testament is so different from the New. Can you explain this?](http://evidenceforchristianity.org/the-bible-says-that-god-does-not-change-but-the-god-of-the-old-testament-is-so-different-from-the-new-can-you-explain-this/)

[Why are there so many translations of the Bible and why are there so many denominations?](http://evidenceforchristianity.org/why-are-there-so-many-translations-of-the-bible-and-why-are-there-so-many-denominations/)

The exercise of church discipline may have gone the way of the horse and buggy, but biblical commands have a lot of staying power, as the Bible does not change. Jesus and Paul gave specific commands as to how to treat those who are in the family of God but who commit repeated public sin. And the fact is that disputes over the necessity and the process of church discipline has been a major issue for most of the history of Christianity, even if it is not a current hot issue in the Church. We saw in volume 1 of this series that the first serious church division—the one which led to the creation of Novatian churches—was over the issue of church discipline. The schism between the Orthodox Roman church and the Donatists was largely due to issues around penance and discipline as well. In the present chapter, one of the chief causes of division within the Anabaptists was over how to apply church discipline. Looking from the outside at the Mennonites it appears that they spent more time and energy on disciplining their own members than on trying to reach out to the lost. Clearly, they became as imbalanced in one direction as many are on the other side today. We will see in chapter V that John Calvin had many disputes and was even kicked out of Geneva over issues related to discipline in the Church. The Puritans spent much of their energy on problems related to their application of church discipline (chapter VII).

Let us, then, take a brief look at what the New Testament teaches about how the church is to maintain a level of spiritual discipline among its members and suggest a path toward using church history and the biblical teaching to achieving a healthy practice today.

We find in the New Testament a mixture of principles and prescriptions for maintaining a proper balance of grace and discipline so that the local church can avoid both legalism and an overly loose atmosphere with regard to sins that can destroy the integrity of the Christian Church. The most important passage we have from Jesus on this question is in Matthew 18:15-20. To quote the first three verses:

“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.”

“In fact, most denominations have ‘solved’ the problem of church discipline: They do not do it at all!”

There are two important features of what Jesus said in this teaching on correction which we ought to apply in the Church. First, he does not mention here any specific sin. We have no suggestion here as to what kinds of sin might rise to the point that such strong action ought to be taken. Second, although the advice regarding those who do not listen “even to the church” may seem quite strong (because it is), it is worth remembering how Jesus treated the pagans and the tax collectors. He loved them and gave them respect. He did not refuse to talk with them—not even close to that. What he did do is he treated them as people who were not yet his disciples.

Paul spoke to church discipline a few times, but the two most important passages are in 1 Corinthians 5 and in Titus 3.

“I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world… But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolator or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people. (1 Corinthians 5:9-11)”

Here Paul prescribes a specific action for a specific set of sins. This is a command not a principle. Let us note some features of this inspired command. First, the sins involved are public ones. In other words, they are actions which are visible to the church and which, if tolerated, would easily infect the whole church. Second, the action to be taken is “disfellowship” or shunning of the individual. In 1 Corinthians 5:13 Paul instructs the church to “expel the wicked person from among you.” This is a very strong action. It is this form of discipline which is virtually unknown in most Christian groups today. We can infer from 2 Corinthians 7 that the purpose of this shunning was not to shame or to judge the offender *per se*, but the action was taken in the hopes that it would bring the sinner to repentance so that he or she could be accepted back into full fellowship. The intent was that when the one being disciplined lost the fellowship of those who had loved them, it would cause them to wake up, repent and return to the body (1 Corinthians 5:5). We know that this worked in at least one case, as Paul advised concerning a disfellowshipped brother in 2 Corinthians 2:6-8, “The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.”

Titus 3:10 is the other key passage on church discipline we will consider here. Paul admonishes Titus, “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them.” This again is a commandment, not a principle. The sin here is of a different sort than in 1 Corinthians 5. The sin Paul is giving direction about is divisiveness. This involves the willful attempt to divide the church over unessential matters. The instruction is to shun such a person, but the purpose appears to be different from 1 Corinthians 5. Whereas the discipline described in 1 Corinthians 5 has the goal of restoring the sinner to the body, in Titus 3, with the divisive person, the purpose appears to be to protect the church, not necessarily to restore the divisive one to the fellowship.

To summarize, Jesus gave a principle and a command regarding virtually any sin, not a specific list of public sins. His commandment, in essence, is that if a person is not behaving as a disciple, they should be treated as one who is not a disciple. His command did not involve shunning, but rather treating the person differently than a brother or sister. Paul gave commandment regarding two specific kinds of sin. For public but individual sin such as immorality or greed he commanded shunning with the dual purpose of maintaining a high standard of holiness in the church and in order to restore the sinner to the body. For divisiveness Paul prescribed disfellowship which does not appear to anticipate the offender being brought back into the body, with the purpose of protecting the church from “wolves” who would destroy her from within.

Now let us consider how to apply the biblical teaching on using discipline to maintain the purity and strength of the church. One tendency we discover from studying church history is the human proclivity to apply discipline either too harshly or too arbitrarily. In the early church, the bishops tended to treat church discipline for offenses such as those described in 1 Corinthians 5 as permanent. Only if the offender went through elaborate prescribed steps such as fastings, praying, and waiting for an extended period were they allowed back into the fellowship. In addition, it was one strike and you are out. There was no second chance. The Anabaptists tended toward harshness as well, but of a different sort. They would shun people for sins not mentioned in the New Testament such as not agreeing with the church leaders or differing over what we might see as relatively minor points of doctrine or practice. The Mennonites and later the Amish tended over time to spend a great amount of energy preserving the purity of the fellowship, to the detriment of the church. We will see this pattern repeated in church history. Those who properly understand that the Church is composed of truly repentant disciples of Jesus often tend to swing the pendulum away from liberality to legalism and mean-spiritedness. A lesson of church history is that it is difficult to find the healthy middle path on this important issue.

As already said, the great majority of Christianity today has moved to the opposite extreme. They talk about correct moral behavior or about what Christian discipleship ought to look like, but they never take the painful step of imposing spiritual discipline on those who stubbornly resist living according to the Christian standard. The result is a church which contains as members people who are either not saved at all or who are in a state of being prodigal Christians. It is nearly impossible to move the Christian church forward when the members blatantly do not practice what is taught.

Studying church history will provide for us a variety of examples of how not to properly apply the passages on church discipline above. It gives us a smaller number of examples of how to do it well, but such examples can be found. In summary, if we are to learn the lessons of church history we will avoid the two extremes. Church discipline should be applied, and biblical standards of discipleship must be upheld by the church. However, it must always be applied with grace and mercy and with the overall benefit of the church as a whole in mind, and also with the spiritual benefit of the one being disciplined in mind as well. This will never be easy. First of all, shepherds must recognize the three different categories as defined by the scriptures above. There will be believers who are in sin or are not behaving as disciples who should be “treated as pagans or tax collectors,” which means they should be treated as no longer members of the church, but as friends we are trying to encourage to be restored. There will be those guilty of repeated blatant and public sin who may need to be disfellowshipped for a time, with the hope of bringing them around, and there will be the divisive wolves who would destroy the flock and who must be driven away decisively and permanently. “Over all of these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” (Colossians 3:14) Church discipline should never be used as a weapon. “’Do not repay evil for evil… It is mine to avenge; I will repay’, says the Lord.”