

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ECCLESIOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Church

One Body, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of All

UNIT 8: CHURCH DISCIPLINE

The Lost Practice of a Loving Church

Lesson 25

WHY CHURCHES FAIL TO PRACTICE DISCIPLINE

And Why They Must — Recovering the Lost Mark of the Church

The church that will not discipline because it fears to hurt will eventually hurt because it refused to discipline. The kindness that avoids hard words in the short term produces destruction in the long.

“Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.”

Revelation 3:19, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Hebrews 12:5–11; Revelation 2:14–16, 20; 3:19; 1 Corinthians 5:6–7; Proverbs 27:5–6; Matthew 18:15–20

“I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.”

1 Timothy 3:15, NASB 1995

Dr. Joshua Nichols

Pastor, Theologian, Author

faithfultotheword.com

Introduction

The first two lessons of Unit 8 have established the biblical case for church discipline with the fullness of theological, exegetical, and pastoral argument that the subject deserves. Lesson 23 examined the four-stage process of Matthew 18, the 1 Corinthians 5 mandate, the goals of discipline, and the spirit of humility and love that the process requires. Lesson 24 examined the restoration of the penitent, the danger of insufficient restoration, and the vision of Luke 15's prodigal son parable as the emotional and theological model for the community's reception of the returning member. The case has been made, clearly, carefully, with the full weight of the apostolic deposit behind it. This final lesson of the unit now addresses the most practically urgent question that the case raises: if the biblical mandate for discipline is this clear, this consistent, and this central to the covenant community's life, why does the contemporary evangelical church almost universally fail to practice it?

The question is not a rhetorical setup for a simple answer. It is a genuine and important diagnostic question whose honest answer requires the willingness to name the specific failures of the contemporary church's pastoral culture, institutional habits, theological confusion, and spiritual condition that produce the discipline-avoidance that is nearly universal in evangelical congregations. The six reasons for the failure are not exotic or surprising; they are the familiar, recognizable features of congregational life that any honest observer of the contemporary evangelical church will recognize immediately. The surprise is not that these reasons exist but that the church has allowed them to override an explicit apostolic mandate without producing sufficient pastoral discomfort to generate correction.

The lesson also addresses the five consequences of the absence of discipline that together constitute the indictment of the church's pastoral failure, the specific ways in which the congregation that abandons discipline harms itself, its members, and its witness. The Christ of Revelation 2 and 3 addresses multiple churches with specific rebukes for specific failures, and the failures He names most persistently are failures of tolerance: the willingness to allow what should not be allowed in the covenant community. His word to those churches is the word that this lesson offers to the contemporary church: not condemnation but urgent summons, 'Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore, be zealous and repent' (Revelation 3:19). The discipline that Christ calls for is not merely the congregation's discipline of its members but the congregation's own repentance for its failure to exercise the discipline it was commanded to exercise.

The lesson closes with the five conditions for the recovery of genuine discipline, the specific things that must be true of a congregation before the recovery of discipline practice is possible. These are not a simple action plan; they are the description of the kind of congregation that can exercise discipline faithfully, and the recognition that most congregations will need genuine spiritual formation, genuine pastoral leadership, and genuine communal commitment before those conditions are met. The recovery of discipline is not a quick institutional fix; it is the fruit of a congregation that is becoming what the new covenant community is supposed to be, a regenerate, accountable, mutually caring, elder-led, covenant-serious community of disciples who love each other enough to tell the truth.

I. THE SCOPE OF THE FAILURE

How Abandoned Is Discipline in the Contemporary Church

A. The Near-Universal Absence of Formal Discipline

Church discipline is not merely practiced imperfectly in the contemporary evangelical church; it is, for the vast majority of congregations, effectively absent. Survey research consistently demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of evangelical churches exercise formal church discipline, the Matthew 18:15-20 process in any recognizable form, either never or extremely rarely. Congregations that do exercise formal discipline are exceptions in their broader ecclesiastical environments, often regarded with a mixture of suspicion and admiration by other congregations that have abandoned the practice. The member who is living in flagrant, unrepented immorality, the cohabiting couple, the unrepentant adulterer, the church officer engaged in consistent financial dishonesty, may remain in full membership and full participation in the covenant community indefinitely, without pastoral address, in thousands of evangelical congregations across the country.

The absence of discipline is not limited to formal exclusion. It extends to the informal, private stages of the Matthew 18 process as well: the first private address that Matthew 18:15 requires of every member who observes a fellow member in serious, persistent sin. The contemporary evangelical culture has so thoroughly privatized the Christian life, so completely separated the individual's relationship with God from the covenant community's corporate accountability, that the very concept of going to a fellow member privately about a specific pattern of sin is experienced as an invasion of personal autonomy rather than as an act of pastoral love. The member who does not exercise the private address of Matthew 18:15 is not merely failing to follow a procedural requirement; she is failing to exercise the pastoral love that the covenant community's mutual accountability requires and that the member in the destructive sin urgently needs.

The absence of discipline is also visible in the membership practices of most evangelical congregations: the failure to remove members who have not attended, participated, or maintained any recognizable connection with the covenant community for years or decades; the failure to address the member whose transfer request from another congregation reveals a pattern of church shopping that is itself a form of covenant-avoidance; and the failure to distinguish, in the congregation's formal membership, between those who are genuine covenant members with genuine covenant commitments and those who have simply retained their names on a roll without any of the living covenant realities that genuine membership requires. The absent member on the roll and the undisciplined member in the pew are both symptoms of the same underlying failure: the contemporary church has lost its understanding of what the covenant community is and what belonging to it requires.

B. Christ's Rebuke of the Tolerant Churches

The letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 provide the most direct scriptural confrontation of the church's failure of discipline, and they address the failure not as a peripheral concern but as a matter worthy of the risen Christ's personal, urgent intervention. To the church at Pergamum: 'But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel... You also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth'

(Revelation 2:14-16). To the church at Thyatira: 'But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, and she does not want to repent of her immorality' (Revelation 2:20).

The churches at Pergamum and Thyatira are not churches without genuine faith or genuine works; the letters acknowledge both before turning to the rebuke. But the specific failure for which the risen Christ threatens to make war is the failure of tolerance, the willingness to allow what should not be allowed in the covenant community. The 'you tolerate' of Revelation 2:20 is the most directly disciplinary rebuke in the New Testament outside of 1 Corinthians 5: you have permitted what should have been addressed; you have left in place what should have been removed; you have allowed the covenant community's integrity to be compromised by the persistent, unaddressed teaching and practice of one who has turned the community away from its covenant character. The risen Christ's response is not patient, extended tolerance of the congregation's tolerance; it is the urgent call to repentance and the warning of imminent judgment if the repentance does not come.

Revelation 3:19's 'Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent', the cover verse for this lesson, is addressed to the church at Laodicea in the context of that church's lukewarmness: its comfortable, self-satisfied, spiritually indifferent compromise with the world. The discipline that Christ calls for here is the congregation's own repentance and renewal, not merely the exercise of the Matthew 18 process over individual members. The lesson is wider than individual discipline cases: the congregation that has abandoned discipline as a practice has, in doing so, demonstrated a corporate lukewarmness, a willingness to accommodate the sin of the culture within its covenant community rather than maintain the covenant seriousness that the Lord of the church requires. The recovery of discipline begins with the congregation's own repentance for the corporate failure that the absence of discipline represents.

II. SIX REASONS CHURCHES FAIL TO PRACTICE DISCIPLINE

An Honest Pastoral Diagnosis

A. *The First Three Reasons*

The first reason evangelical churches fail to practice discipline is the fear of conflict and relational loss. Discipline is inherently confrontational; it requires naming sin specifically, addressing the named sin directly with the person who is practicing it, and escalating the confrontation through stages of increasing communal involvement when the earlier stages produce no repentance. Every stage of the Matthew 18 process involves the risk of relational damage, the risk that the private address will produce not repentance but resentment; that the witnessed address will produce not recognition but resistance; that the congregational address will produce not restoration but departure. Pastors and members who are conflict-averse, which is to say, nearly all of them, find the costs of the discipline process easier to enumerate than its benefits, and the path of least resistance is the path of non-address. The sheep that walks toward the cliff will probably be all right; the conversation required to turn it is guaranteed to be uncomfortable.

The second reason is the fear of litigation. The contemporary legal environment has produced a genuine and not entirely unreasonable pastoral anxiety about the legal consequences of formal church discipline. Several high-profile lawsuits against churches that exercised formal exclusion in the 1980s and 1990s produced a chilling effect on the practice of discipline across evangelical churches, and the legal advisors to church boards and denominations have frequently counseled against the exercise of formal discipline on grounds of legal liability. This fear, while not entirely unfounded, has been significantly overstated in its practical consequences and has been allowed to function as a trump card that overrides an explicit apostolic mandate. Courts have generally held that the First Amendment's protection of religious freedom extends to churches' exercise of their internal discipline processes over members who voluntarily joined the community, and the well-documented cases of successful legal discipline are far more common than the high-profile litigation cases that produced the chilling effect. The fear of litigation has become a convenient rationalization for the avoidance of a hard and costly pastoral practice.

The third reason is the consumerist culture that treats the church as a religious service provider and the member as a consumer whose satisfaction determines whether she continues to attend. In the consumerist model of church, the member's attendance and financial contribution are the primary goods that the pastor and elders must protect, and the discipline that risks those goods is a pastoral tool that rational institutional management will generally decline to use. The member who is approached about a specific pattern of sin may simply leave for the church down the street, and the pastor who initiated the discipline process will have lost a member and her giving without having produced any visible spiritual benefit. The consumerist logic is internally coherent: if the primary metric of congregational success is attendance and giving, the practice that most directly threatens those metrics will be avoided. The problem is not the logic but the metric: the congregation that defines its success by attendance and giving rather than by covenant faithfulness and genuine spiritual formation has already abandoned the apostolic vision of the church long before it abandons the practice of discipline.

B. The Second Three Reasons

The fourth reason is the false equation of love with tolerance, the deeply embedded cultural conviction that genuine love never confronts, never names sin, never applies pressure toward repentance, and that the loving response to every situation is the accepting response. This conviction is not only a cultural import from the therapeutic and egalitarian values of late modernity; it is a theological distortion of the biblical account of love that the contemporary church has absorbed from its cultural environment without adequate theological resistance. The biblical account of love is precisely the opposite of the therapeutic account: love that speaks hard words when hard words are needed is love; love that withholds hard words to protect the comfort of the beloved is not love but a form of self-protection dressed in the language of care. Proverbs 27:5-6 states the contrast with characteristic Old Testament directness: 'Better is open rebuke than love that is concealed. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.' The friend who wounds with honest rebuke is the genuine friend; the enemy who flatters with concealed disapproval has mistaken self-protection for love.

The fifth reason is theological ignorance, specifically, ignorance about what Scripture actually commands regarding the church's responsibility for the covenant faithfulness of its members. The contemporary evangelical church has been formed by a reading of the New Testament that emphasizes the individual's personal relationship with God through faith and minimizes the covenant community's corporate accountability for the lives of its members. In this reading, the church is the gathering place for individuals who each have their own private

relationships with God, and the community's role is to support those individual relationships with worship, teaching, and fellowship, not to exercise any form of authority over the specific conduct of individual members. This reading of the New Testament is not entirely without biblical foundation, the New Testament certainly emphasizes personal faith and the individual's direct access to God through Christ, but it is a partial reading that ignores the covenant community dimensions of the New Testament's ecclesiology that this entire series has been expounding. The congregation that has not been taught what the covenant community is cannot be expected to practice the accountability that covenant community membership requires.

The sixth reason is the absence of meaningful church membership. The congregation that has no defined membership, no covenant expectations communicated to members, no formal process for receiving and removing members, and no communal structure that creates the relational knowledge of specific members that discipline requires, cannot exercise discipline in any meaningful sense. You cannot formally exclude from the covenant fellowship someone who was never formally received into it. You cannot call to account for the covenant standards someone who was never communicated those standards at the time of membership. You cannot exercise the Matthew 18 process over the specific pastoral relationship that the members of a defined covenant community have with each other when no specific pastoral relationship exists. The absence of meaningful church membership is not merely one failure among six; it is the structural failure that makes all five of the other failures both inevitable and permanent. The recovery of discipline is inseparable from the recovery of meaningful covenant membership.

III. FIVE CONSEQUENCES OF THE ABSENCE OF DISCIPLINE

What Happens to the Church That Refuses to Discipline

A. The Congregation's Internal Decay

The first consequence of the absence of discipline is that unrepentant sin festers and spreads. First Corinthians 5:6's leaven metaphor, examined in Lesson 23, establishes this consequence with biological precision: a little leaven leavens the whole lump. The unaddressed sin of one member is not a contained, isolated problem that leaves the rest of the community unaffected. It communicates to every member who is aware of it that the sin is tolerable, that the community's stated covenant standards are not actually enforced, that the claimed consequences of unrepented sin are rhetorical rather than real, and that belonging to the covenant community carries no practical accountability for the covenant commitments that membership nominally requires. Once that message has been communicated, by the community's silence in the face of known, serious, unrepented sin, the practical authority of the community's covenant standards over the conduct of every other member has been significantly diminished.

The second consequence is that the congregation becomes indistinguishable from the world. The New Testament's expectation for the covenant community is that it should be visibly different from its cultural environment, that the transformed lives of its members should constitute a corporate witness to the gospel's power and the Spirit's sanctifying work. When the community's membership includes people whose lifestyles are indistinguishable from the surrounding culture, people who are living in patterns of unrepented immorality,

dishonesty, or idolatry without pastoral address, the community's corporate witness is undermined by the presence of lives that contradict the gospel it claims to proclaim. The watching world draws the reasonable conclusion: the gospel either does not work or does not matter, since the community that claims to have received it is not noticeably different from the community that has not. The absence of discipline does not merely fail to prevent individual sin; it systematically undermines the community's corporate witness to the transforming power of the gospel.

The third consequence is that genuine pastoral care is replaced by superficial niceness. The congregation that never exercises discipline, that never speaks hard words, never addresses specific sins, never calls members to covenant accountability, has not replaced discipline with a deeper or more effective form of pastoral care; it has replaced genuine pastoral care with its simulacrum. The relationship between pastors and members in the discipline-avoidant congregation is a relationship of pleasant mutual non-confrontation, in which the pastors perform the comfort functions of the pastoral office (encouragement, prayer, emotional support) while carefully avoiding the accountability functions (naming sin, calling to repentance, maintaining covenant standards). This relationship is not pastoral care; it is a form of pastoral abandonment wearing the costume of kindness. The member who needs to hear hard words is not receiving pastoral care when she receives only pleasant ones; she is receiving the pastoral equivalent of the physician who tells the cancer patient that everything looks fine rather than naming the condition and recommending the treatment.

B. The Wider Institutional and Spiritual Consequences

The fourth consequence is that the church's witness to the watching world is compromised in ways that extend beyond the individual member's conduct. The watching world's assessment of the Christian community is not only based on what individual members do; it is based on what the community itself does, how it responds to the sin it observes within its own membership, whether the standards it publicly professes are the standards it privately enforces, and whether belonging to the community produces any visible accountability for the conduct of its members. The congregation that claims to be the community of the redeemed and yet tolerates in its membership the same unrepented patterns of sin that characterize the culture around it has provided the watching world with evidence that the community's claims are at least partially hollow. The discipline that addresses serious, unrepented sin in a member is not only a pastoral act toward that member; it is a public declaration to the watching world that the community's covenant character is real and that it takes seriously the life to which the gospel calls those who belong to it.

The fifth consequence, and the most theologically serious, is that the ordinances are profaned. Lesson 22 established the inseparable connection between the Lord's Supper and the covenant community's discipline: the Table belongs to the disciplined community, and the disciplined community belongs to the Table. When a member who is living in serious, unrepented sin continues to receive the covenant meal of the new covenant community without pastoral address, the Supper's enacted declaration is contradicted by the reality of the one who receives it. The bread and cup declare that the recipient is a member of the new covenant community purchased by Christ's blood; the unrepented sin of the undisciplined member declares that the new covenant community's membership is compatible with the lifestyle of one who does not know the Lord. The two declarations are contradictory, and the contradiction is allowed to persist because the congregation has declined to exercise the discipline that would require either the resolution of the sin or the formal recognition that the member's present lifestyle is inconsistent with the covenant membership the ordinance enacts.

IV. FIVE CONDITIONS FOR THE RECOVERY OF DISCIPLINE

What a Congregation Must Become

A. *The First Three Conditions*

The first condition for the recovery of genuine discipline practice is clear, biblical teaching on the nature and purpose of the church. The congregation whose understanding of the church is primarily shaped by the consumerist model, the church as a religious service provider for spiritual consumers, cannot understand why the church should exercise discipline over its members any more than a grocery store should exercise discipline over its customers. The recovery of discipline requires the recovery of the covenant community theology that this entire series has been building: the understanding that the church is the new covenant community of the redeemed, constituted by genuine personal faith, marked by the covenant sign of believers' baptism, governed by qualified and accountable elders, and sustained by the covenant meal of the Lord's Supper. When the congregation understands what it is, it can understand why the accountability that covenant membership requires is not an optional add-on to its community life but a necessary dimension of the covenant community's character.

The second condition is meaningful church membership with clearly communicated expectations. The covenant community's accountability cannot be exercised over members who were never clearly taught what membership requires. The recovery of discipline must include the recovery of a membership process that is substantive enough to form genuine understanding of the covenant commitments that membership entails: what the community believes about Scripture, the gospel, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the mutual accountability of covenant life; what specific commitments the member is making by joining the community; and what the community's process for addressing serious, persistent, unrepented violations of those commitments looks like. The membership process that does not include this formation is a process that is setting both the member and the community up for the failure of accountability that the absence of meaningful membership produces.

The third condition is a culture of humble accountability and mutual care. The discipline process is not a pastoral procedure that can be imported into a congregational culture that has never practiced the ordinary mutual accountability of covenant community life; it is the formal escalation of an accountability culture that should already be present in the informal pastoral relationships of the community's daily life. The congregation in which members regularly, gently, humbly speak the truth to one another in love, in which the private address of Matthew 18:15 is a regular, informal feature of the community's relational life, not a formal institutional act reserved for emergency situations, is the congregation that is most prepared to exercise the formal discipline process when the informal accountability of the community's ordinary life has been exhausted. The formal discipline process is the extraordinary measure; the ordinary measure is the culture of loving, truthful, humble mutual care that the Spirit produces in a genuinely transformed community.

B. *The Fourth and Fifth Conditions*

The fourth condition is elders with the courage to lead and the compassion to correct. The recovery of discipline depends more on the specific pastors and elders who serve a congregation at a given moment than on the congregation's formal governance documents or its stated polity. The elders who have the courage to initiate the

private address of Matthew 18:15 when they observe a pattern of serious, persistent sin in a member, who are willing to accept the relational risk, the potential for conflict, and the possibility of a member's departure in order to pursue the covenant faithfulness that the discipline mandate requires, are the elders who make the recovery of discipline possible. The elders who lack this courage, however theologically orthodox they may be about the discipline mandate, will not exercise it; and the congregation whose elders lack this courage will not recover discipline practice regardless of how many lessons on the topic it studies. The courage that genuine pastoral leadership requires, not the harsh, confrontational courage of the doctrinaire enforcer, but the tender, persistent, hope-filled courage of the shepherd who will not watch the sheep walk toward the cliff without a word, is itself a gift of the Spirit and a fruit of the elder's own genuine formation in the apostolic deposit.

The fifth condition is a congregation that trusts its leaders and loves its members enough to speak truth to one another. The recovery of discipline is ultimately a congregational project, not merely an elder leadership project. The congregation that genuinely trusts its elders, that has seen in the elders' lives and ministry the character, the love, and the pastoral wisdom that Lessons 13-15 identified as the qualifications of genuine eldership, is the congregation that can follow the elders into the territory of formal discipline with the confidence that the elders are acting out of genuine love rather than institutional self-protection or pastoral power. And the congregation whose members genuinely love each other, who have been formed in the covenant community's mutual care through the preaching of the Word, the fellowship of the community's life, and the regular renewal of the Lord's Supper, is the congregation whose members are most likely to exercise the private address of Matthew 18:15 as a normal feature of the community's pastoral life, rather than as an extraordinary institutional act reserved for the elders. The recovery of discipline is the recovery of a community that is genuinely, practically, covenantally the body of Christ, and that acts like it.

V. THE BIBLICAL PROMISE

The Church That Disciplines Will Be the Healthier Church

A. Hebrews 12:5-11 and the Discipline of the Lord

Hebrews 12:5-11 provides the most comprehensive biblical theology of discipline's relationship to health and holiness, and it does so by grounding the church's practice of discipline in the pattern of God's own disciplinary work in the lives of His children: 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reproved by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives. It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live?'

The theological principle embedded in this passage is the most powerful available argument for the necessity and benefit of genuine church discipline: the absence of discipline is not a sign of grace but a sign of illegitimacy. The son who is never disciplined is the son who is not genuinely received; the church that is never disciplined and that never exercises discipline is the church that is, in the most theologically precise sense, not functioning as a genuine covenant community. The discipline is not the sign of God's rejection; it is the sign of His fatherly love. 'For those

whom the Lord loves He disciplines', the discipline is the evidence of genuine love, not the absence of it. And the church that exercises discipline over its members is participating in the same loving, formative, sometimes painful work that the Father of spirits Himself performs in the lives of His children.

Verse 11's description of discipline's outcome is the biblical promise that this lesson offers to every congregation that has the courage to recover the practice: 'All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.' The peaceful fruit of righteousness, the outcome of the discipline process in the life of the disciplined member and in the life of the community that exercises the discipline faithfully, is not a minor or incidental benefit. It is the specific, promised fruit of the specific obedience that the discipline mandate requires. The congregation that practices discipline as Christ commanded will not be a harder congregation, a more judgmental congregation, or a less loving congregation than the congregation that avoids discipline; it will be a healthier congregation, a more genuinely loving congregation, and a more fruitful congregation, because the peaceful fruit of righteousness is the fruit of the community that has had the courage to do the hard, costly, necessary work of genuine covenant community accountability.

B. The Encouragement to Recover the Lost Practice

The recovery of genuine church discipline is not a project for the spiritually robust and institutionally confident congregation that has no other challenges to address. It is a project for every congregation that takes the apostolic deposit seriously, every congregation that wants to be what the new covenant community is supposed to be, that cares about the eternal welfare of its members, that takes seriously the honor of Christ whose name it bears, and that genuinely desires to be the kind of community that the watching world sees and recognizes as something genuinely different from what the world produces on its own. The recovery will be difficult; it will involve pastoral risks, relational costs, and institutional disruptions that more comfortable approaches to congregational life do not require. But the specific blessing that Hebrews 12:11 promises is not available by any other route.

The pastoral encouragement that this series offers to every congregation at the close of Unit 8 is the encouragement of obedience: do what Christ commanded. Not because it will be easy, it will not. Not because it will produce immediate visible results, it may not. Not because the congregation is already sufficiently formed in the five conditions for the recovery of discipline, it may not be. But because the Lord who commanded it is the Lord who said 'Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline', and the congregation that loves its members with the same love will do what He does: pursue the straying, name the sin, call to repentance, receive the penitent, and trust the Spirit to produce the peaceful fruit of righteousness in the lives of those who have been trained by the discipline that genuine covenant community love requires.

The series' extended treatment of church discipline, three full lessons in a 30-lesson systematic theology of the church, is itself a statement about the discipline question's centrality to any adequate account of what the church is and how the church lives. The covenant community that preaches the Word faithfully (Unit 9), that worships with theological seriousness (Unit 9), that sends its members into the world with the mission that Christ commissioned (Unit 10), and that maintains its covenant integrity through the discipline that this unit has described, is the community that is most fully ordered according to the apostolic pattern, and the community that is most fully prepared for the day when the Lord at whose Table it has gathered will come to receive it as His own.

VI. THE CHURCH'S REPENTANCE AS THE FIRST STEP

Addressing the Congregation's Own Failure

A. Naming the Failure

The recovery of genuine church discipline cannot proceed without honest acknowledgment of the failure that has preceded it. The congregation that wishes to recover discipline must first practice the very thing it is attempting to recover: it must exercise discipline on itself, in the form of genuine corporate repentance for the specific failures of covenant accountability that have characterized its recent history. This corporate repentance is not a formal institutional act but a genuine pastoral and communal recognition: we have tolerated what should not have been tolerated; we have been silent when we should have spoken; we have preferred comfort to faithfulness and avoided the hard conversations that genuine love requires. This recognition is the beginning of the recovery.

The Revelation 2-3 letters establish the precedent: when Christ addresses churches that have failed to exercise discipline, His first word is not 'implement a discipline process' but 'repent.' The repentance is the precondition of the recovery, because the recovery of genuine discipline practice requires the kind of spiritual seriousness and moral courage that only genuine repentance produces. The congregation that has convinced itself that its discipline-avoidance was actually a form of pastoral wisdom or charitable tolerance is not yet in a position to exercise genuine discipline; it has not yet seen its failure as a failure. The congregation that has genuinely repented, that has named the failure with the specificity that genuine repentance requires, confessed it to the Lord and to one another, and turned from the cultural accommodations and pastoral cowardices that produced it, is the congregation that is positioned to take the first steps toward genuine recovery.

The naming of the failure is pastoral and specific, not merely generic. It is not enough to say 'we have not been perfect in our discipline practice'; it is necessary to say 'we allowed this specific member to continue in this specific pattern of serious, persistent, unrepented sin for this specific period without initiating the private address that Matthew 18:15 required; we allowed our fear of conflict, our preference for the member's continued attendance, and our confusion of tolerance with love to override the apostolic mandate; and we recognize that our failure was a form of pastoral abandonment of the member we should have loved enough to pursue.' This kind of specific, honest, pastoral naming of the failure is the kind of repentance that prepares the congregation for the kind of faithful, courageous, love-driven discipline practice that the recovery requires.

B. The Patient, Hopeful Path Forward

The recovery of genuine discipline practice is not an event but a journey, a patient, deliberate, Spirit-dependent process of becoming the kind of congregation whose culture, theological formation, governance structure, and relational life make the exercise of discipline both possible and natural. The congregation that begins this journey with the honest acknowledgment of the five conditions that genuine discipline requires, and that assesses honestly which of those conditions are currently present and which are not, is the congregation that is most likely to make genuine progress on the journey rather than cycling through periodic attempts at discipline recovery that founder on the same cultural and structural obstacles that have prevented the practice in the past.

The first step of the journey is almost always the step that this entire series has been providing: the clear, sustained, biblically grounded theological formation of the congregation in the covenant community theology that

makes discipline intelligible and necessary. A congregation that has completed this series has received a substantially more complete account of the nature of the church, the grounds of church membership, the purposes of the ordinances, and the necessity of discipline than most evangelical congregations ever receive. The formation that this series provides is not a guarantee of discipline practice; it is the necessary theological foundation without which the practice cannot be sustainable. The congregation that understands why discipline belongs to the covenant community's life is the congregation that is most likely to have the theological resources to exercise it faithfully when the specific situations that require it arise.

The closing word of this unit, and the closing word of the series' treatment of the three marks of the true church that the first three units of the ecclesiology series established, is the word that has governed the entire series: faithfulness to the apostolic deposit. The church that preaches the Word faithfully, administers the ordinances rightly, and exercises discipline lovingly is the church that the apostolic deposit describes, not because these practices guarantee spiritual success in any particular institutional sense, but because obedience to the Lord who commanded them is the only genuine path of blessing for the community He purchased with His own blood. The marks are His gifts as surely as they are His commands, and the congregation that receives them as gifts will find in them the very things they were designed to provide: the formation, the covenant integrity, and the communal health that the new covenant community was always meant to display to the watching world.

VII. THE UNIT AND THE SERIES IN RETROSPECT

Where We Have Come From and Where We Are Going

A. The Argument of Unit 8

Unit 8 has argued its central claim across three lessons with the full weight of the apostolic deposit behind it: church discipline is the lost practice of a loving church, and its recovery is among the most urgent pastoral tasks facing the contemporary evangelical congregation. Lesson 23 established the biblical mandate, the four-stage process of Matthew 18, the demand for action in 1 Corinthians 5, the goals of discipline, the sins that warrant formal action, and the spirit of humility, love, and patient pursuit that the process requires. Lesson 24 established the vision of restoration, the anatomy of genuine repentance, the parable of the prodigal son as the model for the community's reception of the returning penitent, the danger of excessive punishment, and the joy that heaven itself celebrates when the lost is found. This lesson has addressed the most practically urgent question: why contemporary churches fail and what the recovery requires.

The three-lesson argument is not merely an academic exercise in ecclesiological completeness; it is the most pastorally urgent argument this series has yet made. The governance of Unit 5, the ordinances of Units 6 and 7, and the worship of Units 9 and 10 are all dimensions of the covenant community's life that this series has addressed with theological seriousness and pastoral care. But discipline is the practice whose absence is most widespread, most harmful to the specific members who need it most, and most damaging to the community's covenant integrity and public witness. The recovery of this practice is not merely one item among many on the agenda of ecclesiological renewal; it is one of the most direct forms available to the local congregation of taking seriously the Lord who said 'Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.'

The unit also provides the final argument for the regenerate church membership that Unit 4 established at the series' beginning. The regenerate membership conviction, that the new covenant community consists of those who personally know the Lord, expressed through credible professions of faith and the covenant sign of believers' baptism, is only as meaningful as the accountability structures that maintain it. The congregation that holds the regenerate membership conviction theoretically but refuses to exercise the discipline that maintains it practically has, in the most concrete sense, abandoned the conviction while retaining the language. The recovery of discipline is the recovery of the seriousness with which the congregation takes its own most fundamental ecclesiological conviction: that this community is not a gathering of interested observers but a covenant community of the genuinely redeemed, and that the covenant they have entered is a covenant that carries genuine mutual obligations, genuine accountability, and genuine care.

B. Looking Forward to Units 9 and 10

The series turns in Unit 9 to corporate worship, the gathered assembly before the living God. Unit 9 will address the regulative principle of worship, the centrality of preaching, the role of singing and prayer, and the theological formation that genuine corporate worship provides for the covenant community. The transition from discipline (Unit 8) to worship (Unit 9) is theologically significant: the congregation that has maintained its covenant integrity through the faithful exercise of discipline is the congregation that is most fully prepared to gather before the living God in the corporate worship that Unit 9 describes. The worship of the covenant community is offered by the community to the God who established it, and the integrity of that offering is inseparable from the covenant integrity of the community that makes it.

Unit 10 will address the mission of the church, the community's sending into the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ and the mandate to make disciples of all nations. The community that has been formed in the covenant theology of Units 1-4, governed according to the apostolic pattern of Unit 5, sealed by the ordinances of Units 6-7, maintained in covenant integrity by the discipline of Unit 8, and formed in the worship of Unit 9, is the community that is most fully prepared for the mission that Unit 10 describes. The mission is not an activity added to the community's life from outside; it is the outward expression of the inward reality of the community's covenant life, the overflow of the life that the Spirit has produced in the covenant community into the world that the community is called to reach with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.”

Revelation 3:19, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Revelation 3:19	The risen Christ's word to the church at Laodicea: 'Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.' Establishes: (1) discipline as an expression of Christ's love, not its absence; (2) the Laodicean church's lukewarmness as itself a failure requiring disciplinary repentance; (3) the congregation's own repentance as a form of self-discipline that must precede the recovery of discipline over members. The cover verse for this lesson grounds the entire Unit 8 argument in the character of the Lord who commands what He Himself practices.
Revelation 2:14-16, 20	Christ's rebukes to the churches at Pergamum (tolerating teaching that leads to immorality) and Thyatira (tolerating the false prophetess Jezebel). Both rebukes center on the same failure: 'you tolerate', the willingness to allow what should not be allowed in the covenant community. The specific threat: 'I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.' Establishes that the risen Christ takes the failure to exercise discipline with the same urgency that He brings to doctrinal error and personal sin.
Hebrews 12:5-11	The most comprehensive biblical theology of discipline's relationship to health and holiness: 'Those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives.' The theological principle: the absence of discipline is a sign of illegitimacy, not grace. The promise: 'All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.' The church that exercises discipline will not be a harder church but a healthier church, a more genuinely loving church, and a more fruitful church.
Fear of Conflict	The first of six reasons evangelical churches fail to practice discipline: the relational and pastoral cost of the confrontation that the Matthew 18 process requires at every stage. Produced by the natural conflict-aversion of both pastors and members; by the specific pastoral risk that the private address may produce resentment and departure rather than repentance and restoration. The pastoral antidote: the recognition that the willingness to accept the cost of conflict for the sake of a member's covenant faithfulness is itself a form of pastoral love that the conflict-avoidant response withholds.
Consumerist Church	The model of the church as a religious service provider and the member as a spiritual consumer whose satisfaction determines continued attendance and financial contribution. The third reason evangelical churches fail to exercise discipline: the consumerist logic treats members as customers whose departure is always a loss, making discipline, which risks departure, an irrational institutional choice in the consumerist framework. The antidote: the recovery of the covenant community theology in which the primary metric of congregational health is covenant faithfulness rather than attendance and giving.
False Equation of Love with Tolerance	The fourth reason churches fail to discipline: the theologically distorted conviction that genuine love never confronts, never names sin, and never applies pressure toward repentance. Produced by the therapeutic and egalitarian values of late modernity absorbed by the evangelical church without adequate theological resistance. Refuted by Proverbs 27:5-6 ('Better is open rebuke than love that is concealed; faithful are the wounds of a friend') and by Hebrews 12:5-11 (the Father disciplines every son He receives). The genuine love that wounds with honest rebuke is more loving than the pseudo-love that flatters with concealed disapproval.
Theological Ignorance	The fifth reason churches fail to discipline: ignorance of what Scripture actually commands regarding the church's responsibility for its members' covenant faithfulness. Produced by the over-individualized reading of the New Testament that emphasizes the individual's personal relationship with God while minimizing the covenant community's corporate accountability.

	The antidote: sustained, clear, biblically grounded teaching on the covenant community theology that makes discipline both intelligible and necessary, which is the specific contribution that this series has been designed to provide.
Meaningful Church Membership	The first and most foundational condition for the recovery of discipline: a membership process that communicates clearly what covenant membership requires, what the community believes, and what process the community follows when covenant commitments are seriously, persistently, and unrepentantly violated. The structural argument: the absence of meaningful membership makes the exercise of discipline both logically incoherent and practically impossible. You cannot formally exclude someone who was never formally received, or call to account for standards that were never communicated.
Proverbs 27:5-6	The Old Testament's most direct statement about the pastoral character of honest rebuke: 'Better is open rebuke than love that is concealed. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.' Refutes the false equation of love with tolerance by establishing that the friend who wounds with honest rebuke is the genuine friend, while the one who flatters with concealed disapproval is the deceiving enemy. The therapeutic culture's preferred 'love', accepting people without confrontation, is, on Proverbs' account, not love at all but a form of deceptive self-protection.
Peaceful Fruit of Righteousness	The promised outcome of genuine discipline in Hebrews 12:11: 'All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.' The specific, promised fruit of the specific obedience that the discipline mandate requires. Not immediate or visible in the short term; yielded to those who have been trained by the discipline over time. The biblical promise that grounds the encouragement to recover the practice: the church that disciplines will be the healthier church.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the contemporary evangelical church's near-universal abandonment of formal church discipline is not a mature pastoral wisdom that has superseded an antiquated apostolic practice but a failure, a specific, identifiable, theologically explicable failure, to obey an explicit apostolic mandate whose grounds are as compelling today as they were in the first century. The six reasons for the failure do not constitute an adequate justification for the abandonment; they constitute a diagnosis of the specific pastoral cowardices, theological confusions, and cultural accommodations that have produced the abandonment. The diagnosis is the beginning of the recovery.

We must believe that the five consequences of the absence of discipline, unrepentant sin festering and spreading, the congregation becoming indistinguishable from the world, genuine pastoral care being replaced by superficial niceness, the church's witness being compromised, and the ordinances being profaned, are not theoretical risks but actual, ongoing harms being experienced by the many congregations that have abandoned the practice. The harms are real; the members being allowed to walk into destruction are real; the witness being undermined is real. The urgency of the recovery is not institutional but pastoral.

We must believe the promise of Hebrews 12:11: the church that practices discipline as Christ commanded will not be a harder, more judgmental, or less loving church than the church that refuses. It will be a healthier church, a more genuinely loving church, and a more fruitful church, because the peaceful fruit of righteousness is the specific, promised fruit of the specific obedience that the discipline mandate requires. This belief, grounded in the character of the God who disciplines every son He receives because He loves them, is the theological foundation of the courage that genuine discipline practice requires.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

We should feel a genuine pastoral grief over the harm that the contemporary church's abandonment of discipline has caused, not primarily the institutional harm to the church's reputation or witness, but the specific personal harm to the specific people who have been allowed to walk into destruction without a word. The member living in unrepented immorality whom the congregation has never approached; the couple whose destructive marriage patterns have been passively observed but never pastorally addressed; the church officer whose financial dishonesty has been quietly noted but never confronted, these are real people whose real harm is, at least in part, the consequence of real pastoral cowardice. The grief that their situations should produce is the grief that motivates genuine recovery rather than mere institutional reform.

We should feel a genuine desire for this congregation to be the kind of community that loves its members enough to tell the truth. Not the harsh truth of the doctrinaire enforcer, and not the soft truth of the perpetually encouraging but never confronting pastor. The pastoral truth of the friend described in Proverbs 27:6: the faithful wounds of genuine care, offered with the humility and the tears that Galatians 6:1 requires, in the spirit of the shepherd who will not watch the sheep walk toward the cliff without pursuit. This desire is itself a spiritual formation goal for the community, and the prayer for it is the prayer for the Spirit to produce the genuine love that would rather wound faithfully than flatter deceptively.

We should desire for this congregation to have the courage to take the first step toward the recovery of genuine discipline practice, whatever that first step looks like in its specific situation. Not the completion of the recovery process, that will take years and require the sustained formation of the five conditions this lesson has identified. But the first step: an honest assessment of the congregation's current discipline practice against the apostolic standard, an honest naming of the specific ways in which the congregation has failed the standard, and a genuine, specific commitment to moving, however slowly and however patiently, in the direction that the apostolic deposit points.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- Read Hebrews 12:5-11 as the biblical promise that grounds the encouragement to recover discipline. Note the specific logic of verses 7-8: if you are without discipline, you are illegitimate children, not genuine sons. Apply the logic to the congregation rather than merely to the individual: the church that never exercises discipline is the church that has implicitly questioned its own legitimacy as the covenant community of genuine children. Bring one specific insight from this application to the next study session.
- Conduct an honest personal assessment of the six reasons for the contemporary church's failure to practice discipline. For each reason, assess honestly: is this a factor in this congregation's practice or avoidance of discipline? Fear of conflict? Fear of litigation? Consumerist culture? False equation of love with tolerance? Theological ignorance? Absence of meaningful membership? For each factor that is present, identify the specific form it takes in this congregation's culture and bring the assessment to an elder in a constructive, pastorally framed conversation about the congregation's trajectory.
- Assess this congregation's current practice against the five conditions for genuine discipline recovery. For each condition (biblical teaching on the nature of the church, meaningful membership, culture of humble accountability, courageous and compassionate elders, congregation that trusts and loves enough to speak truth), assign an honest assessment of where the congregation is: fully present, partially present, or not yet present. Identify the single condition whose development would most directly advance the congregation's overall capacity for genuine discipline practice and bring a specific suggestion for how that development might begin.
- Pray the prayer of corporate repentance for this congregation's failures in discipline practice. Not a generic prayer of inadequacy but a specific, honest prayer that names specific ways in which the congregation has failed the apostolic mandate: specific members who have walked into destruction without pastoral address, specific patterns of sin that have been observed but not addressed, specific instances in which the fear of conflict or the preference for comfort overrode the obligation of pastoral love. The corporate repentance that this lesson calls for is genuine prayer, not a theological exercise.
- Identify one specific, concrete step that this congregation could take in the next six months that would move it in the direction of genuine discipline recovery: a study of the membership covenant and its expectations with the current membership body, a pastoral training event on the Matthew 18 process, an elder-led conversation about the congregation's current threshold for initiating pastoral address, or some other step that is both feasible given the congregation's current situation and genuinely oriented toward the recovery the apostolic mandate requires. Bring the specific step to an elder as a constructive recommendation.

Key Texts: *Hebrews 12:5–11; Revelation 2:14–16, 20; 3:19; 1 Corinthians 5:6–7; Proverbs 27:5–6; Matthew 18:15–20*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before this three-lesson unit on church discipline, how did you personally think about church discipline, was it a practice you understood, valued, and expected from this congregation? Has the unit changed your understanding of the practice, its importance, and your own congregation's relationship to it? What is the single most significant thing you have learned in the three lessons that you did not know or think clearly before?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Revelation 2:12-16 and 2:18-20. What specific failure does Christ identify in the church at Pergamum (verses 14-15)? What specific failure does He identify in the church at Thyatira (verse 20)? What verb does He use to describe each failure, and what does that verb establish as the nature of the failure? What response does He call for in verse 16, and what threat does He attach to the failure to respond?
- Read Revelation 3:14-20. How does Christ describe the church at Laodicea in verses 15-16? What does He say about His own response to this condition? In verse 19, what does He identify as the motivation for reproof and discipline? What does the cover verse of this lesson contribute to the theology of discipline that Hebrews 12 and Matthew 18 have provided?
- Read Hebrews 12:5-11. What does verse 8 say about the member who is without discipline? What does verse 9 say about the response to earthly fathers' discipline and the implications for the Father of spirits? What does verse 11 promise as the outcome of discipline for those who have been trained by it? How does this passage function as a promise for the congregation that recovers genuine discipline practice?
- Read Proverbs 27:5-6. What comparison does verse 5 draw between open rebuke and concealed love? What does verse 6 say about the wounds of a friend compared to the kisses of an enemy? How does this passage directly address the false equation of love with tolerance that is the fourth reason churches fail to practice discipline?
- Read 1 Corinthians 5:6-7. What metaphor does Paul use in verse 6 to describe the community-wide effect of unaddressed sin? What does verse 7 say about the basis for the community's covenant cleanliness, and how does it connect the discipline instruction to the Lord's Supper? How do these two verses together establish the connection between the absence of discipline and the profanation of the ordinances?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson identifies six reasons for the contemporary church's failure to practice discipline. Which of these six reasons do you think is the most significant single contributor to the failure in the evangelical church broadly? In this congregation specifically? Is there a seventh reason not identified in the lesson that you think deserves to be named?
- The lesson argues that the absence of meaningful church membership makes the exercise of discipline both logically incoherent and practically impossible. Is this argument persuasive? Can you envision a congregation with no formal membership process exercising genuine discipline over people who attend regularly? What would prevent the exercise, and what would have to be true for it to be possible even without formal membership?

- The lesson argues that the congregation that practices discipline will be a healthier, more loving, and more fruitful congregation than the congregation that refuses, not despite the discipline's difficulty but because of the specific promise of Hebrews 12:11. Is this promise convincing in light of the real pastoral costs and relational disruptions that genuine discipline practice produces? How do you hold together the immediate difficulty of discipline and the promised long-term fruit?
- The lesson describes the contemporary evangelical church's abandonment of discipline as 'the most widely observed and most harmful institutional failure of the evangelical church in the present generation.' Is this characterization too strong, or does it accurately describe the scale and the consequences of the failure? What evidence would support or challenge this characterization?
- The lesson calls for the congregation's own corporate repentance for its failures in discipline practice as the first step toward recovery. Is this an unusual and somewhat demanding call, or is it the logical application of the discipline principle to the congregation as a whole? How does the congregation practice this corporate repentance, and how does it differ from mere institutional reform?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- Having completed the three lessons of Unit 8, what is your honest assessment of this congregation's current situation in relation to church discipline? Which of the five conditions for genuine discipline recovery are currently present, and which are not? Which is the most significant gap, and what would closing that gap require in terms of pastoral leadership, theological formation, communal culture, or structural change?
- The lesson argues that the recovery of discipline is inseparable from the recovery of meaningful covenant membership. Does this congregation have a membership covenant or membership expectations that are clearly communicated to incoming members? If not, what would a meaningful covenant look like in this congregation's specific context, and what would be required to develop and implement one? If yes, is the covenant being communicated with sufficient clarity and seriousness to form the understanding of covenant accountability that the discipline mandate presupposes?
- The lesson's practical application calls for identifying one specific, concrete step toward genuine discipline recovery in the next six months. What is your specific recommendation, and why? Describe the step in specific enough detail to be actionable: who should initiate it, what it should consist of, what the expected outcome is, and what the congregation should do next if the first step is taken and shows positive results.
- Having completed all of Unit 8, write a brief (one paragraph) statement of why church discipline matters, addressed to a fellow member of this congregation who has not studied the unit and who thinks the contemporary church's abandonment of discipline is probably fine. The statement should address the member's most likely objection (isn't discipline unloving?), make the strongest available case for the practice from the apostolic deposit, and close with the most compelling pastoral vision for what genuine discipline makes possible. Bring the statement to the next study session.

Prayer Focus

Begin by reading Hebrews 12:5-11 aloud in full: 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives. It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.' Read it again, substituting the name of this congregation for 'son' and 'sons': 'for those whom the Lord loves, He disciplines.' This congregation, whatever its specific failures, whatever its current distance from the apostolic standard, is loved by the Lord who purchases and disciplines the communities He receives. Let that love ground the prayers that close this unit.

Pray the prayer of corporate repentance that this lesson has called for. Not as a theological exercise but as a genuine act of communal acknowledgment before the God who sees the specific ways in which this congregation has failed the discipline mandate. Pray for the specific failures that honest assessment identifies: the members who have walked into destruction without pastoral address; the patterns of sin that have been observed but tolerated; the pastoral cowardices that have been rationalized as pastoral wisdom; the cultural accommodations that have been accepted as unavoidable realities. Bring these specific failures before the God of Revelation 3:19, the God who reproves because He loves, and ask for the genuine repentance that is the first step toward the recovery His love desires to produce.

Pray for the five conditions of genuine discipline recovery in this congregation's specific situation. Pray for the theological formation that clear biblical teaching on the covenant community provides; pray for the membership structures that meaningful covenant membership requires; pray for the culture of humble accountability that the Spirit produces in genuinely formed communities; pray for the specific elders who lead this congregation, that the Lord would give them the courage to pursue and the compassion to correct and the wisdom to distinguish the situations that require formal discipline from those that require ordinary pastoral care; and pray for the congregation itself, that the Lord would produce in the membership the quality of genuine mutual love that makes the honest conversation of Matthew 18:15 possible as a normal feature of the community's pastoral life rather than an extraordinary institutional act reserved for emergency situations.

Pray for the broader evangelical church's recovery of genuine discipline practice. Pray for the congregations, and there are many, that are in the same position as this one: theoretically committed to the apostolic standard, practically far from it, and uncertain about how to close the gap. Pray for the pastors and elders who know the discipline mandate and who are preparing to initiate the first difficult conversations and the first formal processes that the recovery requires in their specific congregations. Pray that the Lord would protect those pastors from the legal, relational, and institutional consequences that discipline recovery sometimes produces, and that He would give the congregations they serve the grace to receive the hard pastoral love of genuine discipline as the evidence of genuine love rather than as the imposition of institutional control. And pray for the members, in thousands of congregations, who are in patterns of serious, persistent, unrepented sin and who have never been approached

by a pastor who loved them enough to name it. Pray that the Spirit's own disciplinary work would reach the hearts that the congregations have failed to reach, and that the peaceful fruit of righteousness promised in Hebrews 12:11 would be experienced even by those whose covenant communities have not yet had the courage to pursue them.

Close by receiving the promise with which this unit ends: the church that practices discipline as Christ commanded will be the healthier church, the more genuinely loving church, and the more fruitful church. Not because discipline is easy or pleasant, it is neither. But because the peaceful fruit of righteousness is the fruit of the community that has had the courage to do the hard, costly, necessary work of genuine covenant community accountability. That fruit is worth pursuing. That obedience is worth the cost. And the Lord who said 'Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline' is the Lord who will honor the obedience of every congregation that takes Him at His word.

“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.”

Ephesians 3:20–21, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Hebrews 12:5–11; Revelation 2:14–16, 20; 3:19; 1 Corinthians 5:6–7; Proverbs 27:5–6; Matthew 18:15–20

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Dr. Joshua Nichols

josh@faithfultotheword.com | faithfultotheword.com