

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 23

THE BIBLICAL MANDATE FOR CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Matthew 18:15–20 — The Process Christ Prescribed

Discipline is not the weapon of a harsh church but the surgery of a loving one. The shepherd who watches a sheep walk toward destruction without a word has not honored kindness — he has abandoned his calling.

“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed.”

Matthew 18:15–16, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Matthew 18:15–20; 1 Corinthians 5:1–13; Galatians 6:1; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14–15; Titus 3:10–11; 1 Timothy 5:19–20

“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

Church discipline is the most neglected practice in the contemporary evangelical church and, simultaneously, the practice whose absence most visibly marks the church's departure from the apostolic pattern. Lesson 15 examined church discipline as one of three specific domains of congregational governance authority; the three marks of the true church in Lesson 8 identified the exercise of discipline as the third indispensable characteristic of the genuine church alongside faithful preaching and the right administration of the ordinances. Now Unit 8 addresses discipline directly, with the fullness of theological, pastoral, and practical attention that this neglected and misunderstood practice deserves. This is the most pastorally demanding unit in the series and, for many congregations, the most practically urgent.

The urgency of the discipline question is not primarily institutional. It is pastoral and theological. It is pastoral because the absence of discipline in a congregation is not merely an organizational deficiency; it is a failure of love. The congregation that watches a member walk into the destruction of unrepented, flagrant sin, that knows about the pattern, has the apostolic mandate to address it, and does nothing, has not been merciful; it has been cowardly. The same love that leads a parent to speak hard words to a child walking toward harm, the same love that leads a physician to perform painful surgery that is necessary for a patient's survival, is the love that leads a congregation to exercise the discipline that Christ prescribed for the sake of the soul it is watching go astray. The failure to exercise discipline is not kindness; it is a form of pastoral abandonment dressed in the language of tolerance.

The urgency is also theological because the absence of discipline erodes the boundaries that the church's covenant identity requires. The series has consistently argued that the new covenant community is defined by its members' personal knowledge of God, expressed through credible professions of faith, marked by the covenant sign of believers' baptism, and sustained by the covenant community's ongoing mutual accountability. The congregation that never exercises discipline is a congregation that has, in practice, abandoned the regenerate membership conviction: if any pattern of sin, however flagrant and however unrepented, is tolerated without pastoral address, the congregation has implicitly conceded that genuine membership in the new covenant community is compatible with the lifestyle of one who does not know the Lord. That concession undermines the entire ecclesiology that this series has been building.

Unit 8 addresses church discipline in three lessons. This lesson examines the biblical mandate for discipline: the four-stage process of Matthew 18:15-20, Paul's rebuke of the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 5, the goal of restoration that Galatians 6:1 establishes, the secondary goals of discipline beyond the primary one of restoration, the specific sins that warrant formal discipline, and the spirit in which discipline must be exercised. Lesson 24 will address the restoration of the penitent, the far more joyful side of the discipline process, and Lesson 25 will address why contemporary churches fail to practice discipline and what the recovery of discipline requires.

I. THE REALITY OF SIN IN THE CHURCH

Discipline Is Necessary Because the Church Is Not Yet Glorified

A. Sin in the Covenant Community Is a Given, Not an Exception

The first thing that must be said about church discipline is the thing most churches most need to hear before they can think clearly about it: sin in the covenant community is not a failure of the church's mission, an anomaly to be surprised by, or an embarrassment to be covered over. It is the predictable, inevitable, scripturally anticipated reality of a community composed of redeemed-but-not-yet-glorified sinners who are genuinely in Christ and genuinely still in the flesh. The New Testament addresses sin in the church with the same matter-of-fact pastoral seriousness that a physician addresses illness in a hospital: not surprised that it exists, not scandalized by its presence, but committed to addressing it with the specific remedies that have been appointed for it. Matthew 18:15's 'if your brother sins' assumes the reality; the process that follows assumes the community's obligation to respond. The question is never whether sin will occur; the question is how the covenant community will respond when it does.

The specific sins that the New Testament's discipline passages address are not the ordinary sins of the daily Christian life, the pride, the selfishness, the impatience, the prayerlessness, the inconsistency that every member of the covenant community recognizes in her own life and that the preached Word addresses in its regular ministry. These ordinary sins are addressed by the means of grace: by preaching, by the Lord's Supper, by prayer, by the fellowship of the covenant community, and by the Spirit's ongoing sanctifying work. The formal discipline process of Matthew 18 is addressed to a different and more specific situation: the brother who has sinned against another member in a way that requires direct pastoral address; the member of the Corinthian community whose sexual immorality was flagrant, persistent, and unrepented; the one who persists in sinful behavior despite private correction and refuses to hear the witnesses that verse 16 requires. The trigger for formal discipline is not sin per se, which would implicate every member, but the specific combination of seriousness, persistence, and unrepentance that the apostolic texts identify as the threshold for the community's formal response.

The theological ground of the church's obligation to exercise discipline is rooted in the same covenant-community theology that has governed the entire series. If the new covenant community is defined by its members' personal knowledge of God and expressed through genuine, credible, covenant-faithful lives, then the member whose life persistently contradicts the covenant he professes is not merely an individual in personal spiritual difficulty; he is a member whose ongoing, unrepented sin constitutes a contradiction of the community's covenant identity. The church that tolerates that contradiction without pastoral address has permitted the community's covenant character to be publicly contradicted without response. The discipline is not primarily punitive, a punishment imposed on the offender for his transgression, but covenantal, the community's response to a member whose behavior is contradicting the covenant under which the community gathers and which the community is responsible for maintaining.

B. The Three Marks and the Third Mark

The third mark of the true church, examined in Lesson 7 alongside the faithful preaching of the Word and the right administration of the ordinances, was identified as the exercise of discipline. The Reformation's recovery of the

three marks was a recovery of the New Testament's own account of the genuine church's distinguishing characteristics; the churches of the Reformation were insisting not only on the primacy of the Word and the recovery of biblical baptism and the Lord's Supper, but on the recovery of the community's pastoral accountability that the medieval church had replaced with the institutional hierarchy's coercive power. The three marks belong together: the Word forms the community in the apostolic deposit; the ordinances enact and renew the covenant; and the discipline maintains the community's covenant fidelity by addressing the sin that the Word has named and that the covenant's integrity requires to be addressed.

The connection between the third mark and the other two has been noted at several points in this series. The Lord's Supper, as Lesson 22 established, belongs to the disciplined community: the covenant meal of the covenant community requires the covenant integrity that discipline maintains. The regenerate church membership of Lessons 10-12 requires the discipline that keeps the membership from being in name only: the congregation that never removes members for unrepented, flagrant sin has, in practice, allowed its regenerate membership standard to become meaningless. The elder-led governance of Unit 5 requires the discipline that Unit 8 describes: the elders who lead the congregation through the Matthew 18 process are exercising exactly the governing, shepherding, and guarding functions that Lesson 13 identified as the elder's responsibilities. Discipline is not an isolated practice that can be added to or removed from the church's life without affecting everything else; it is organically connected to every major element of the covenant community's life that the series has described.

II. THE FOUR-STEP PROCESS OF MATTHEW 18:15-20

The Process Christ Prescribed

A. *Steps One and Two: Private Address and Witnessed Address*

The foundational text for the church's formal discipline process is Matthew 18:15-17, where Jesus prescribes a graduated process of increasing communal involvement: 'If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.' The structure of the process is elegantly simple and theologically profound: it begins with the most private and least coercive form of address and escalates the level of communal involvement only when the less escalated forms have failed to produce repentance. The goal at every stage is not the establishment of guilt or the imposition of punishment but the winning of the brother: 'you have won your brother' (verse 15) is the pastoral vision that animates the entire process.

The first step is the private address between the offended or observing member and the one who has sinned: 'go and show him his fault in private.' The initiative belongs to the one who knows about the sin; the obligation is to go, not to wait for the offending party to come. The private character of the first step is itself a form of mercy: by addressing the sin privately before involving others, the addressing member is protecting the offending party's reputation and giving her the maximum opportunity to repent and be restored before the matter becomes known to a wider circle. The pastoral wisdom of the private first step is confirmed by its contrast with the alternative: the member who bypasses the private address and goes immediately to the elders or to the congregation has violated

both the process that Jesus prescribed and the mercy that the process is designed to provide. The private address is not merely procedurally required; it is the expression of the pastoral love that genuinely wants to win the brother without unnecessary exposure.

The second step is introduced when the private address fails: 'if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed.' The witnesses serve two functions simultaneously. First, they confirm the facts: the two-or-three-witness requirement is a basic standard of evidence derived from Deuteronomy 19:15 that protects the accused from a single unsubstantiated accusation. The sin must be established by sufficient witness; the process cannot proceed on the basis of one person's word against another. Second, the witnesses provide additional pastoral appeal: the one who would not hear a single address may hear the same concern expressed by two or three members whose combined pastoral weight is more difficult to dismiss. The witnesses are not prosecutors; they are additional voices of pastoral concern seeking the same goal as the first private address, the winning of the brother whose sin has placed him in spiritual danger.

B. Steps Three and Four: Church Address and Exclusion

The third step is the formal involvement of the congregation: 'if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.' Lesson 15 addressed this step in detail as one of the three specific domains of congregational governance authority. The congregation that is 'told' about the matter is not merely an audience for a report; it is the covenant community exercising its binding and loosing authority (verse 18) through the formal act of communal address to the unrepentant member. The congregation's address is the most authoritative form of pastoral appeal available to the covenant community: the entire body, gathered in Christ's name (verse 20), speaking to one of its members about the sin that her unrepentance has placed before the whole community. If the private address carries the weight of one member's pastoral concern, and the witnessed address carries the weight of two or three, the congregational address carries the weight of the whole covenant body speaking with the authority that the Lord has granted to the gathered assembly.

The fourth step is the one that most directly confronts the contemporary church's aversion to discipline: 'if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.' This is the formal exclusion of the unrepentant member from the covenant fellowship of the congregation, the removal of the member from the fellowship table, from the Lord's Table, and from the formal protections and privileges of covenant membership. The language of 'Gentile and tax collector' is not a statement of contempt for the excluded person but a statement about the relationship: the one who has been excluded is no longer to be related to as a covenant brother but as one who stands outside the covenant community, in need of the same gospel proclamation and the same call to repentance that the community would address to any unbeliever. The exclusion is not abandonment; it is the formal recognition that the member's unrepentant lifestyle is incompatible with the covenant membership she claims, and the pastoral redirection of the community's relationship with her from covenant maintenance to evangelistic concern.

Verse 18's binding and loosing authority, 'Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven', grounds the congregation's disciplinary act in the authority of Christ Himself. The formal exclusion performed by the congregation gathered in Christ's name (verse 20) is not merely an institutional act; it is an act that the risen Christ stands behind with the authority of heaven. This is the most sobering feature of the discipline text: the community's careful, graduated, pastorally motivated formal exclusion of the unrepentant member is an act that heaven ratifies. This

is also why the process must be followed with scrupulous care, genuine pastoral love, and patient pursuit through each stage: the authority being invoked is not institutional authority but the authority of the Lord who purchased the community and who holds both the discipline practitioner and the discipline subject accountable for the faithfulness of the process.

III. FIRST CORINTHIANS 5 AND THE DEMAND FOR ACTION

When Sin Goes Unaddressed

A. Paul's Rebuke and the Corinthian Failure

First Corinthians 5:1-13 is the New Testament's most direct and most demanding address to the pastoral failure of tolerating unaddressed, unrepented, flagrant sin in the congregation. The specific situation is stark: 'It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst' (verses 1-2). The situation is not merely that an immorality exists, sexual immorality of a kind that even the Gentile world regarded as aberrant, but that the congregation has responded to it with arrogance rather than mourning, and with tolerance rather than discipline. The failure Paul rebukes is not the sin itself but the congregation's failure to exercise the discipline that the sin requires.

Paul's instruction is unambiguous: 'I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus' (verse 5). The decision is Paul's in an apostolic sense, he is directing the Corinthian congregation to exercise the discipline it has failed to exercise, but it is to be enacted by the assembled congregation ('when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus', verse 4). The goal is explicitly salvific: the destruction of the flesh (the breaking of the power of the sin that is destroying the offender) so that the spirit may be saved. The severe act of formal exclusion is motivated not by punitive instinct or institutional self-protection but by the genuine pastoral concern for the eternal welfare of the one being excluded. If the exclusion produces the recognition of the severity of the sin and the return to genuine repentance and faith, it has accomplished its highest purpose.

Verse 6's leaven metaphor extends the disciplinary concern from the individual to the community: 'Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?' The unaddressed sin is not a contained, isolated problem that affects only the member whose sin it is. It is leaven in the community's dough, a potentially spreading contamination whose tolerance communicates to the rest of the community that the sin is acceptable, that the community's covenant standards are not serious, and that the claimed consequences of unrepented sin are not real. Paul's instruction is not merely to protect the congregation from the offending member's influence but to address the community's own arrogant tolerance as a form of corporate participation in the sin's normalization: by not mourning, by not removing, the Corinthian congregation has become complicit in the sin it is tolerating.

B. Remove the Wicked Man

First Corinthians 5:13's concluding command is among the most direct in the New Testament: 'Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.' The language echoes Deuteronomy's repeated formula for the community's response to specified sins (Deuteronomy 13:5; 17:7, 12; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21, 24; 24:7), a deliberate echo that situates Paul's instruction in the covenant-community tradition of Israel's own discipline practice. The new covenant community, like the old, has an obligation to maintain its covenant integrity by addressing the unrepented, flagrant sin that contradicts the community's covenant character. The specific sins that Paul lists in verse 11 as warranting this response are instructive: 'any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler', a list that spans sexual immorality, financial dishonesty, verbal abuse, substance abuse, and idolatry. The common characteristic is not the specific category of sin but the combination of seriousness and unrepentance: these are serious sins being practiced persistently by someone who claims to be a brother.

Paul's instruction to 'not even eat with such a one' (verse 11) and to 'remove the wicked man from among yourselves' (verse 13) is the most specific disciplinary command in the New Testament, and its application to the Lord's Supper is direct: the one who has been formally excluded from the covenant fellowship is excluded from the covenant meal. The connection between 1 Corinthians 5 and 1 Corinthians 11, the discipline and the Table in the same letter, is not coincidental; Paul is addressing the same community about the same covenant integrity from two different angles. The community that fails to exercise the discipline of chapter 5 is the same community that fails to discern the body rightly at the Table of chapter 11. The Table's integrity and the community's discipline are inseparable.

The two-category distinction that Paul draws in verse 12 is exegetically significant for the practice of discipline: 'For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges.' The discipline is directed at those within the church, those who are members of the covenant community and whose sin contradicts the covenant they have professed. Those outside the church are not subject to the church's discipline; they are subject to God's judgment. This distinction is practically important: the church is not called to exercise discipline over the community's non-members, however serious their sins; it is called to exercise discipline over its own members, whose covenant profession includes the accountability that covenant membership requires.

IV. THE GOALS OF DISCIPLINE

Restoration First, but Not Only Restoration

A. *The Primary Goal: Restoration*

The primary goal of church discipline is the restoration of the offending member to genuine repentance, genuine faith, and genuine covenant faithfulness. Galatians 6:1 is the locus classicus for this restorative vision: 'Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.' The verb translated 'restore' is *katartizo*, the same verb used in the Gospels for the mending of fishing nets (Matthew 4:21), the restoring of the torn to wholeness, the making functional of what was broken. The discipline process is the pastoral work of restoration: the patient,

gentle, Spirit-dependent effort to bring the one who has been caught in sin back to the covenant faithfulness from which she has strayed.

The restorative character of discipline shapes everything about how it should be undertaken. The spirit of gentleness that Paul requires is not a soft-pedaling of the sin's seriousness; it is the pastoral counterpart of the surgeon's care in performing the procedure that is necessary for the patient's health. The surgeon who is gentle is not the surgeon who avoids cutting; it is the surgeon who cuts with precision, skill, and genuine concern for the patient's welfare rather than with the harshness that would turn a necessary procedure into gratuitous injury. The discipline that is exercised in a spirit of gentleness is the discipline that names the sin clearly, calls for genuine repentance persistently, and pursues the offending member through the graduated stages of the Matthew 18 process with the patient, loving, hope-filled persistence of a community that genuinely wants its member back.

Paul's parenthetical 'each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted' is one of the most important pastoral safeguards in the discipline text. The one exercising discipline is not exempt from the same vulnerability to sin that has overtaken the one being disciplined. The Spirit who produces the gentleness required for restorative discipline is the same Spirit who is working against the temptation to spiritual pride, punitive satisfaction, or self-righteous condemnation that can corrupt the discipline process from within. The elder who leads the community through the Matthew 18 process while forgetting his own continuing dependence on the same grace that he is offering the offending member has not grasped the humility that the process requires. The community that exercises discipline from the posture of the prodigal's father, running toward the returning son with the robe and the ring and the fatted calf, is the community that has understood what restoration looks like when it is finally and joyfully achieved.

B. Four Secondary Goals

Beyond the primary goal of the offender's restoration, the New Testament identifies four secondary goals that discipline serves even when restoration is not achieved in the immediate timeframe. The first is the maintenance of the church's purity and witness. First Corinthians 5:6's leaven metaphor establishes the community-wide stakes of unaddressed sin: the community's tolerance of serious, unrepented sin communicates to watching members and the watching world that the claimed transformation of the gospel is not serious, that the covenant community's standards are no different from the world's, and that belonging to the new covenant community carries no accountability for the covenant commitments it requires. The church that exercises discipline is a church that demonstrates, in the most concrete form available, that the gospel actually produces the new life it claims to produce and that the community constituted by the gospel takes that claim seriously.

The second secondary goal is the deterrence of sin in others. First Timothy 5:20 addresses this function directly: 'Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning.' The public rebuke, which is the congregational stage of the Matthew 18 process, has a deterrent function for the rest of the community. When the congregation sees that serious, unrepented sin is addressed with pastoral seriousness rather than tolerated with institutional convenience, the message to every other member is clear: the covenant community takes the covenant seriously, and the member who persists in serious unrepented sin will not be allowed to remain in the covenant fellowship indefinitely without pastoral address. This deterrence is not primarily punitive; it is protective, the community's public acknowledgment that the destructive power of unrepented sin is real and that the community is committed to protecting its members from that destruction.

The third secondary goal is the protection of the flock from the influence of unrepented sin. The leaven metaphor of 1 Corinthians 5:6 applies here as well: the unaddressed sin of one member is not a contained problem that leaves the rest of the community unaffected. It normalizes the sin for the members who observe it being tolerated, it emboldens others who may be struggling with similar temptations, and it creates a culture in which the community's covenant standards are communicated as less serious than the apostolic deposit requires them to be. The discipline that removes the unrepented member from the fellowship is also the discipline that protects the rest of the membership from the normalizing influence of tolerated, persistent unrepentance. The fourth secondary goal is the vindication of the honor of Christ. The community that bears the name of Christ and tolerates the persistent public contradiction of His character and commands by one of its members is a community that is allowing His name to be dishonored in its own household. The discipline that addresses that contradiction is also the discipline that takes seriously the honor of the One whose blood purchased the community and whose name it bears.

V. THE SINS THAT WARRANT FORMAL DISCIPLINE

Seriousness, Persistence, and Unrepentance

A. The Threshold for Formal Discipline

The question of which sins warrant formal discipline is one of the most practically important and most carefully nuanced questions in the discipline unit, and it requires the same careful attention that the other questions of the unit have received. The short answer is: serious, persistent, unrepented sin warrants formal discipline. The longer answer requires the unpacking of each element of that formulation. 'Serious' excludes the ordinary sins of the daily Christian life that the means of grace are addressing through the regular ministry of the Word, the Lord's Supper, and the community's mutual encouragement. 'Persistent' excludes the single act of sin that is genuinely and immediately repented, for which the assurance of forgiveness and the exhortation to walk more carefully are the appropriate pastoral responses rather than the graduated process of Matthew 18. 'Unrepented' is the most critical qualifier: it is not the sin itself but the persistence in the sin combined with the refusal to repent that triggers the formal discipline process. The first private address of Matthew 18:15 is itself the test of repentance: if the private address produces genuine repentance, 'you have won your brother,' and the process is complete at its first stage.

First Corinthians 5:11 provides the New Testament's most specific list of the categories of sin that warrant formal discipline: 'an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler.' The list is not exhaustive, it does not attempt to catalogue every sin that might require formal discipline, but it is representative, and its diversity is instructive. The list spans sexual immorality (the specific occasion for the Corinthian instruction), financial dishonesty (covetous, swindler), verbal abuse (reviler), substance abuse (drunkard), and false worship (idolater). The common characteristic is not the specific domain of the sin but the seriousness of the sin and its incompatibility with the covenant community's character: these are not occasional lapses that the member is genuinely struggling against; they are patterns of behavior that define the member's ongoing life and that, being practiced without repentance, are incompatible with the covenant profession that membership requires.

Romans 16:17, 2 Thessalonians 3:6, and Titus 3:10-11 add two additional categories that 1 Corinthians 5 does not explicitly name. Romans 16:17 addresses the sin of divisiveness: 'Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them.' The member who persistently sows discord, faction, and division in the covenant community, who is 'contrary to the teaching' and who uses her influence to create parties rather than pursue unity, is engaging in a form of community destruction that the apostolic discipline texts specifically identify. Titus 3:10-11 names the 'factious man' (hairetikos anthropos) specifically: 'Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned.' The heretical or factious member receives two warnings (corresponding to the first two stages of the Matthew 18 process) before the formal rejection, a compressed discipline timeline that reflects the urgency of doctrinal or divisive sin for the community's integrity.

B. What Formal Discipline Does Not Address

Clarity about what formal discipline does not address is as important as clarity about what it does. Formal discipline is not the appropriate response to every interpersonal conflict in the congregation, every doctrinal disagreement between members, or every failure to meet the community's practical expectations. The ordinary pastoral work of the elder's office, preaching, counseling, pastoral visitation, the Lord's Supper, and the encouragement of the community's fellowship, addresses these situations through the regular ministry of the means of grace, not through the formal graduated process of Matthew 18. The elder who invokes the Matthew 18 process in response to interpersonal disagreements, doctrinal questions, or lifestyle differences that fall short of the serious-persistent-unrepented threshold has misapplied the discipline text and is using the community's most serious pastoral tool for situations that require pastoral wisdom and gentle correction rather than formal accountability.

The distinction between private sin that requires pastoral attention and public, scandalous sin that requires formal discipline is also important. The member who struggles privately with a sin that she has not yet overcome but that she is genuinely fighting, that she has confessed to her pastor or elder, and that she is actively seeking to put to death through the means of grace, is not a candidate for formal discipline; she is a candidate for the sustained, personal, pastoral support that genuine sanctification requires. The discipline process is not designed to address the member who is failing in the normal struggles of the Christian life; it is designed to address the member who has departed from the covenant community's fundamental commitments and who is refusing, after pastoral address, to acknowledge that departure or to seek restoration.

The specific concern for the confidentiality of the private stages of the discipline process deserves emphasis. The first and second stages of the Matthew 18 process are private precisely to protect the accused member's reputation. The member who has been approached privately and has responded to the private address with genuine repentance has not committed a public sin that requires public address; her sin and her repentance are between herself, the addressing member, and God. The member who gossips about the early stages of a discipline process, who shares the details of a private or witnessed address with members of the congregation who are not involved in the process, has violated both the spirit and the letter of the Matthew 18 process and has done pastoral harm that the process was specifically designed to prevent. The confidentiality of the early stages is not institutional protocol; it is pastoral mercy.

VI. THE SPIRIT OF DISCIPLINE

With Humility, Love, and Tears

A. The Humility That Discipline Requires

The spirit in which church discipline must be exercised is as theologically important as the process by which it is exercised, and the two cannot be separated without corrupting both. Galatians 6:1's 'spirit of gentleness' and 'each one looking to yourself' establish the first dimension of the required spirit: humility. The elder or member who approaches the discipline of a fellow member from a posture of moral superiority, self-righteousness, or contempt for the offender has already disqualified himself from the pastoral work he is attempting. The discipline that is offered from the posture of a fellow sinner, one who has been shown mercy by the same God whose covenant the offending member has broken, one who remains dependent on the same grace that the offending member needs, and one who has no ground of self-congratulation in the comparison of their respective sin histories, is a discipline that has the pastoral credibility to be received as what it genuinely is: an act of love from a fellow pilgrim, not a condemnation from a judge.

The tears that Paul associates with the experience of discipline in 2 Corinthians 2:4, written in the context of the Corinthian discipline situation, 'out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you', are the emotional signature of genuine pastoral love exercised in the discipline context. The elder who leads the Matthew 18 process without a broken heart is not yet leading it with the spirit it requires. The community that gathers to address the unrepentant member's sin without genuine grief for the sin and genuine longing for the member's restoration has not yet entered the pastoral experience that makes the formal address an expression of love rather than an institutional procedure. The tears are not weakness; they are the evidence that the discipline is being exercised with the pastoral heart that distinguishes genuine covenant community care from institutional governance.

Second Thessalonians 3:14-15 provides a crucial pastoral instruction for the posture of the community toward the member who has been placed under discipline: 'If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.' The discipline requires withdrawal of normal fellowship, 'do not associate with him', but the withdrawal is not abandonment, not contempt, and not the severing of all relationship. The disciplined member is still to be admonished as a brother: still addressed with pastoral concern, still pursued with the gospel call to repentance, still regarded as a person whose restoration is the goal and whose eternal welfare is the community's genuine concern. The formal withdrawal of covenant fellowship is itself a form of pastoral speech: it says, by its very seriousness, that the sin matters, that the covenant matters, and that the community's relationship with the member cannot continue as if the unrepented sin were not between them.

B. The Long Game of Patient Pursuit

Church discipline is not a single decisive act; it is a process of patient, persistent, hope-filled pastoral pursuit that may unfold over months or years. The graduated stages of Matthew 18 are themselves a form of patience built into the process: the community does not move immediately from private address to formal exclusion; it offers

multiple opportunities for repentance at increasing levels of communal engagement before the final stage is reached. And even after the formal exclusion is enacted, the community's relationship with the excluded member is not over; it has been transformed from covenant maintenance to evangelistic concern, and the community continues to pray for the member's repentance and to receive any evidence of genuine repentance with the same joy with which the father receives the returning prodigal.

The patience that discipline requires is simultaneously the patience of genuine love and the patience of genuine faith. It is the love that will not give up on the straying member, that continues to pray for her and reach toward her and pursue her with the gospel call to repentance even when every earlier approach has been rejected. And it is the faith that believes the Spirit is able to produce repentance in the hardest heart, that the same power that raised Christ from the dead can break through the defenses of the most entrenched unrepentance, and that the community's faithful, persistent, gentle pursuit of the straying member is the instrument the Spirit may choose to use in the accomplishment of that restoration. The community that gives up too quickly, that abandons the pursuit after the first or second rejection, has not yet learned the patient, hope-filled pastoral perseverance that genuine love in the discipline context requires.

The relationship between discipline and the parable of the lost sheep in Matthew 18:12-14 is not coincidental; Jesus tells the parable of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to seek the one lost sheep immediately before the discipline process of verses 15-20. The parable establishes the pastoral vision that animates the process: the shepherd does not dismiss the lost sheep as a negligible loss, does not decide that ninety-nine is enough, and does not wait for the sheep to find its own way back. He goes. He leaves what is secure to pursue what is lost. He seeks until he finds. And when he finds it, he does not sternly correct the sheep for having strayed; he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. The discipline process is the community's enactment of this parable: the graduated pursuit of the straying member with the same urgent, persistent, joyful pastoral concern that the shepherd of Matthew 18:12-14 demonstrates toward the one sheep that has gone astray from the ninety-nine.

VII. DISCIPLINE AND THE WHOLE ECCLESIOLOGY

The Practice That Belongs to the Covenant Community

A. Discipline as an Expression of Love

The paradox that the cover maxim of this lesson names, that discipline is not the weapon of a harsh church but the surgery of a loving one, is the key to understanding why the contemporary church's abandonment of discipline is not a display of pastoral kindness but a failure of pastoral responsibility. The surgeon who withholds a necessary operation because she fears the patient's discomfort has not been merciful; she has allowed a treatable condition to progress to a potentially fatal one. The congregation that watches a member walk into the destruction of unrepented, persistent sin, that knows the sin, has the apostolic mandate to address it, and does nothing, has not been loving; it has been cowardly. The failure to exercise discipline is, in the most precise theological sense, a failure of love for the member being abandoned to her sin and a failure of love for the community being asked to pretend that the sin's contradiction of the covenant's character does not matter.

The positive vision of discipline as love is expressed most clearly in the framework of Hebrews 12:5-11, which the New Testament itself applies to God's 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.' The discipline of the Lord is the evidence of His love, not the absence of it. The son who is never disciplined is the illegitimate son, not the beloved son. The community's exercise of discipline over its members is the community's participation in the same parental love that God expresses through His own disciplinary work in the lives of His children. The community that never disciplines is the community that has, in practice, claimed a love superior to God's own, a love so tender that it cannot bear to do what God Himself does for the sake of the beloved children He is conforming to the image of His Son.

The recovery of church discipline in the contemporary church is not a recovery of harshness, legalism, or pastoral power for its own sake. It is the recovery of a practice that the apostolic deposit mandates, that the covenant community's integrity requires, that the straying member's eternal welfare urgently needs, and that the watching world needs the church to demonstrate: that the gospel actually produces the new life it claims to produce, that the covenant community takes its covenant character seriously, and that belonging to the new covenant community carries the genuine accountability that genuine love always requires. The church that practices discipline is not the harsh church; it is the loving church, the church that loves its members enough to pursue them when they stray, to name their sin when they deny it, and to exercise the authority that Christ granted to the gathered assembly for exactly this purpose.

B. Looking Forward to Lessons 24 and 25

This lesson has established the biblical mandate for discipline, the four-stage process, the goals, the sins that warrant formal action, and the spirit of humility, love, and patient pursuit that the process requires. Lesson 24 will address the far more joyful dimension of the discipline story: the restoration of the penitent. When the Matthew 18 process, or the broader discipline process that 1 Corinthians 5 addresses, produces the genuine repentance that is its goal, what should happen? How should the community respond to the returning member? What does genuine restoration look like, and what are the risks of both excessive punishment and premature restoration? Second Corinthians 2:5-11 will be the primary text for that lesson, and the parable of the prodigal son will provide its pastoral vision.

Lesson 25 will address the most practically urgent question that Unit 8 raises: why do contemporary churches fail to practice discipline, and what is required for its recovery? The six reasons for the contemporary church's discipline failure, from the fear of conflict and legal liability to the false equation of love with tolerance, will be examined with pastoral honesty, and the five conditions for the recovery of discipline will be addressed with the same combination of theological conviction and practical wisdom that the series has consistently sought to bring to every question. The unit closes with the conviction that the church that practices discipline as Christ commanded will be healthier, holier, and more faithful than the church that refuses, not because discipline is easy, but because obedience to Christ is always the path of blessing, and the recovery of this lost mark is among the most urgent tasks facing the contemporary evangelical church.

"If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother."

Matthew 18:15, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Church Discipline	The covenant community's graduated, pastorally motivated process of addressing serious, persistent, unrepented sin in its members, as prescribed in Matthew 18:15-20, commanded in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, and governed by the restorative vision of Galatians 6:1. Distinguished from ordinary pastoral care and correction by the specific threshold of serious-persistent-unrepented sin and by the formal, graduated character of the process. The third mark of the true church alongside faithful preaching and right administration of the ordinances.
Matthew 18:15-20	The foundational text for the church's formal discipline process: a four-stage graduated escalation from private address (verse 15) to witnessed address (verse 16) to congregational address (verse 17a) to formal exclusion (verse 17b). Each stage is introduced only when the previous stage has failed to produce repentance. The goal at every stage is 'you have won your brother' (verse 15). The process is grounded in the binding-and-loosing authority of verse 18 and the promise of Christ's presence in the gathered assembly of verse 20.
Katartizo	The Greek verb translated 'restore' in Galatians 6:1: 'restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.' The same verb used for the mending of fishing nets (Matthew 4:21), the restoring of the torn to wholeness, the making functional of what was broken. Establishes the primary goal of church discipline as the restoration of the offending member to covenant faithfulness, not the punishment of the offender or the institutional protection of the congregation.
1 Corinthians 5:1-13	Paul's rebuke of the Corinthian congregation for tolerating unrepented immorality without exercising discipline. The primary New Testament case study in the failure of discipline and its corrective instruction. Key features: (1) the sin is described as scandalous even by Gentile standards (verse 1); (2) the congregation's arrogant tolerance is rebuked more strongly than the sin itself (verse 2); (3) the instruction is to deliver the offender to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved (verse 5); (4) the leaven metaphor establishes the community-wide stakes of unaddressed sin (verse 6).
Leaven Metaphor	Paul's image in 1 Corinthians 5:6 for the community-wide effect of tolerated, unaddressed sin: 'Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?' Establishes that unaddressed sin in a member is not a contained, isolated problem but a potentially spreading contamination that normalizes the sin for the rest of the community, emboldens others who may be struggling with similar temptations, and communicates that the community's covenant standards are not serious.
Restorative Discipline	The understanding of church discipline as primarily aimed at the restoration of the offending member to genuine repentance, faith, and covenant faithfulness, rather than primarily at punishment, institutional self-protection, or the maintenance of appearances. Grounded in Galatians 6:1's katartizo, Matthew 18:15's 'you have won your brother,' and 2 Corinthians 2:5-11's instruction to restore the one who has repented. The primary goal of the discipline process at every stage.
Serious-Persistent-Unrepented	The three-part threshold that triggers formal church discipline: the sin must be (1) serious, not the ordinary sins of the daily Christian life but a significant violation of the covenant community's fundamental commitments; (2) persistent, not a single act that is immediately repented but a pattern of behavior that continues despite pastoral address; and (3) unrepented, the key qualifier, since it is not the sin itself but the refusal to repent after pastoral address that moves the process from ordinary pastoral care to formal discipline.
Titus 3:10-11	Paul's compressed discipline instruction for the 'factious man' (hairetikos anthropos): 'Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned.' Adds divisiveness and heresy to the list of sins warranting

	formal discipline (alongside the 1 Corinthians 5:11 list). The compressed timeline (two warnings before rejection) reflects the urgency of divisive or doctrinal sin for the community's integrity.
Deliver to Satan	Paul's language in 1 Corinthians 5:5 for the formal exclusion of the unrepentant member: 'I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.' The language describes the formal removal of the member from the protective covenant fellowship of the congregation into the realm outside the community where Satan is active. The goal is explicitly salvific: the breaking of the sin's power over the offender so that his spirit may be saved. Not abandonment but a severe pastoral act motivated by genuine concern for the offender's eternal welfare.
Second Thessalonians 3:14-15	Paul's instruction for the community's posture toward the disciplined member: 'do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.' The withdrawal of normal fellowship is combined with the continuation of pastoral concern: the disciplined member is still to be admonished as a brother, still pursued with the gospel call to repentance, still regarded as a person whose restoration is the community's goal. The formal withdrawal of covenant fellowship is itself a form of pastoral speech, not abandonment.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that church discipline is not an optional pastoral practice that a congregation may choose to observe or neglect according to its temperament and cultural context, but a specific, explicit, Christ-prescribed mandate for every covenant community. The 'if your brother sins' of Matthew 18:15 is not addressed only to congregations that have a sufficient institutional tolerance for conflict and a sufficient legal immunity from the consequences; it is addressed to every congregation that bears the name of Christ and claims to be His body. The absence of discipline is not a neutral pastoral choice; it is a specific form of disobedience to a specific apostolic command.

We must believe that the primary goal of discipline is the restoration of the offending member to genuine repentance, faith, and covenant faithfulness. The discipline process is not a mechanism for removing difficult people from the congregation, not a tool of pastoral power, and not an instrument of institutional self-protection. It is the community's most serious act of pastoral love, the willingness to exercise the hard, costly, patient work of pursuing a straying member through the graduated stages of the Matthew 18 process because the community genuinely cares about the eternal welfare of the one it is pursuing. The community that exercises discipline with this primary goal clearly in view is the community that is most likely to exercise it faithfully.

We must believe that the spirit of discipline is as important as the process of discipline, and that a technically correct process exercised in the wrong spirit, with pride, punitive satisfaction, contempt for the offender, or pastoral impatience, has violated the discipline mandate as surely as the congregation that never exercises discipline at all. The humility of Galatians 6:1 ('each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted'), the gentleness of the same verse, and the love of 2 Corinthians 2:4 are not optional ornaments added to a fundamentally institutional process; they are constitutive of the process itself.

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

We should feel a pastoral grief over the contemporary church's abandonment of discipline, not primarily as an institutional failure or an ecclesiological deviation, but as a failure of love for the members being abandoned to their sin and for the communities being asked to pretend that serious, unrepented contradiction of the covenant character does not matter. The congregation that never disciplines is not a congregation of unusual kindness; it is a congregation that has substituted the appearance of tolerance for the reality of pastoral care.

We should feel a genuine compassion for the specific members of this congregation who may be in patterns of serious, persistent sin that have not been pastorally addressed, not compassion that looks away from the sin, but compassion that desires the restoration that the discipline process is designed to produce. The love that drives genuine discipline is the love that would rather risk the temporary disruption of confrontation than allow a brother or sister to continue walking toward destruction without a word.

We should desire for this congregation to be the kind of community in which the Matthew 18 process is genuinely practiced, not as an institutional mechanism invoked for institutional reasons, but as the pastoral expression of the community's genuine love for its members and its genuine commitment to the covenant character that the new covenant community requires. This desire is itself a form of prayer: Lord, give us the courage to do what You have commanded, and the love to do it the way You have prescribed.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Read Matthew 18:12-20 as a unit, noting how the parable of the lost sheep (verses 12-14) provides the pastoral vision that animates the discipline process of verses 15-20. How does the shepherd's urgent, persistent, joyful pursuit of the one lost sheep describe the spirit in which the Matthew 18 process should be undertaken? What does the father's joy at the sheep's return (verse 13) say about the emotional climate in which genuine discipline is exercised?
- Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 and identify the specific elements of Paul's instruction: the description of the sin, the rebuke of the congregation's tolerance, the command to deliver the offender to Satan, the salvific goal of that delivery, the leaven metaphor, the instruction to not even eat with the offender, and the concluding command to remove the wicked man. For each element, identify the specific pastoral principle it embodies and the specific pastoral failure it corrects. How many of these elements are present in this congregation's current approach to serious, persistent, unrepented sin in its membership?
- Examine your own understanding of what sins warrant formal discipline in this congregation. Using the three-part threshold of serious-persistent-unrepented, identify: (a) one example of a sin serious enough to warrant discipline if it were persistent and unrepented; (b) one example of a sin that might appear serious but would not warrant formal discipline at the Matthew 18 level; (c) one example of a pastoral situation that might feel like a discipline situation but is more appropriately addressed through ordinary pastoral care and encouragement. Bring your examples to the next study session for discussion.
- Reflect on a specific relationship in your life in which a fellow member of this congregation has said or done something that has caused genuine harm to you or to the community. Have you followed the Matthew 18:15 instruction, 'go and show him his fault in private'? If the private address has not yet happened, commit to taking that step this week, with the pastoral goal clearly in mind: 'you have won your brother.' If the private address has already been taken and responded to with genuine repentance, give thanks for the restoration and pray for its ongoing fruit in the restored relationship.
- Pray specifically for the elders of this congregation as they carry the responsibility of leading the community through any discipline processes that may currently be active or that may become necessary in the future. Pray for their courage to do what the apostolic mandate requires; for their gentleness to do it in the spirit that Galatians 6:1 prescribes; for their wisdom to distinguish the sins that warrant formal discipline from those that are more appropriately addressed through ordinary pastoral care; and for their pastoral hearts to maintain the genuine love for the offending member that is the spiritual engine of the entire process.

Key Texts: *Matthew 18:15–20; 1 Corinthians 5:1–13; Galatians 6:1; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14–15; Titus 3:10–11; 1 Timothy 5:19–20*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- What is your honest assessment of this congregation's current practice of church discipline? Does the congregation exercise the Matthew 18 process in any recognizable form? If not, is the absence due to genuine uncertainty about when and how to exercise it, to cultural reluctance, to fear of the consequences, or to some combination? Has your understanding of the mandate changed as a result of this lesson?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Matthew 18:15-20. What is the initiating condition of verse 15? What action does it require of the person who observes the sin? What is the goal explicitly stated in verse 15? What are the three escalating stages of the process? What authority does verse 18 grant to the congregation? What does verse 20 add about the theological ground of the congregation's action?
- Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-7. What is the specific sin Paul addresses (verse 1)? What does Paul rebuke more harshly, the sin itself or the congregation's response (verse 2)? What is Paul's instruction in verse 5, and what is the specific goal of that instruction? How does the leaven metaphor of verse 6 extend the concern beyond the individual offender to the community as a whole? How does verse 7 connect the discipline instruction to the Lord's Supper?
- Read Galatians 6:1. What is the pastoral vision this verse establishes for the discipline process? What does the verb 'restore' (katartizo) communicate about the goal? What spirit does Paul require of those exercising the restoration? What practical warning does Paul attach, and why is that warning essential to the spirit of genuine discipline?
- Read 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15. What does Paul instruct regarding association with the unruly or disobedient member (verse 14)? How does verse 15 qualify that instruction? What does 'yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother' specify about the community's ongoing posture toward the disciplined member?
- Read 1 Timothy 5:19-20. What protection does verse 19 provide for elders accused of sin? What action does verse 20 require for elders who are found to be sinning persistently? What secondary goal does the phrase 'so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning' identify?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that church discipline is an expression of love rather than a weapon of harshness. Is this argument persuasive to you? What would you say to a member of the congregation who argues that genuine Christian love would never confront another member about his sin, that the most loving thing is always to accept people where they are without judgment? What specific biblical evidence would you use to support the view that confrontation and restoration are forms of love rather than opposites of it?
- The lesson identifies the three-part threshold of serious-persistent-unrepented for triggering formal discipline. Is this threshold clear enough to be practically useful, or is it so flexible that each congregation will interpret it differently? What are the risks of setting the threshold too low (too much formal discipline) and too high (too little formal discipline)? How should the elders navigate the judgment calls at the edges of the threshold?

- Paul's instruction to 'deliver such a one to Satan' (1 Corinthians 5:5) is among the most severe pastoral acts in the New Testament. What does this phrase mean, and what is its pastoral goal? Does the salvific purpose, 'so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus', adequately justify the severity of the act? How does understanding this phrase in light of Galatians 6:1's restorative vision change how you read it?
- The lesson argues that the failure to exercise discipline is 'a failure of love dressed in the language of tolerance.' Is this a fair characterization of contemporary evangelical congregations that do not practice formal discipline? Is it possible for a congregation to genuinely love its members without exercising the Matthew 18 process? What would a congregation that genuinely loves its members but does not practice formal discipline look like, and why is the lesson's argument that such a congregation is failing its members compelling or not?
- The lesson distinguishes between the ordinary pastoral care that addresses the daily struggles of the Christian life and the formal discipline process that addresses serious-persistent-unrepented sin. Is this distinction clear and practically workable? How does a pastor or elder decide whether a pastoral situation calls for ordinary counseling and encouragement or for the initiation of the Matthew 18 process?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson identifies several secondary goals of discipline beyond the primary goal of restoration: the maintenance of the church's purity and witness, the deterrence of sin in others, the protection of the flock, and the vindication of the honor of Christ. Which of these secondary goals is most relevant to this congregation's current situation? For each secondary goal, identify one specific way in which the congregation's failure to exercise discipline is currently undermining that goal.
- The lesson emphasizes the importance of confidentiality in the early stages of the discipline process. Are there currently situations in this congregation in which the early stages of what should be a private pastoral address have become matters of informal community gossip rather than confidential pastoral pursuit? What specific commitments of confidentiality and direct address would most directly address this pattern?
- The lesson describes the spirit of discipline as requiring humility, love, and tears. Honestly assess: could the elders and members of this congregation exercise the Matthew 18 process with these qualities genuinely present? If not, what spiritual formation would be required before the congregation is ready to exercise discipline in the spirit the apostolic mandate requires? Is the answer to that question 'we need to grow spiritually before we can exercise discipline' or 'we need to begin exercising discipline in the process of growing spiritually'?
- The lesson closes by previewing Lesson 24 (the restoration of the penitent) and Lesson 25 (why churches fail and what recovery requires). Before those lessons are studied, what do you anticipate will be the most significant barrier to this congregation's recovery of genuine discipline practice? And what single step could this congregation take now, even before Unit 8 is complete, that would most directly move it in the direction of the apostolic mandate?

Prayer Focus

Begin by reading Matthew 18:12-15 aloud: 'What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying? If it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray. So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish. If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private.' The discipline process of verse 15 is immediately preceded by the parable of the lost sheep and the Father's heart expressed in verse 14: it is not the will of your Father that one of these little ones perish. The entire discipline process, with all its difficulty, its pastoral cost, and its potential for relational disruption, is grounded in this single truth: it is not the will of the Father that one of these little ones perish. Every private address, every witnessed address, every congregational address, and every act of formal exclusion is the community's attempt to act in accordance with the Father's own refusal to abandon the one sheep that has gone astray. Let this ground the prayers that follow.

Pray for the courage that the discipline mandate requires. The fear of conflict, the fear of relational loss, the fear of being perceived as harsh or judgmental, and the fear of the legal and institutional consequences that discipline can produce are all real fears that real pastors and real congregations face in real pastoral situations. Pray that the Lord would grant to the elders of this congregation the specific courage that obedience to the discipline mandate requires: the courage to go privately when going privately is hard, to bring witnesses when the private address has failed, to bring the matter to the congregation when the witnessed address has been refused, and to exercise the formal exclusion when every earlier stage has been exhausted. This courage is not natural; it is the specific gift of the Spirit to those who have committed themselves to the pastoral obedience that the mandate requires.

Pray for the gentleness that the discipline process requires. Galatians 6:1's spirit of gentleness is not a passive quality, it is the active, costly, Spirit-produced disposition of the elder who approaches the offending member with a broken heart rather than a hardened one, with genuine love for the person being addressed rather than institutional concern for the community's reputation, and with the humility of one who knows that she is a sinner being asked to address a fellow sinner about the sin that is destroying him. Pray that the Spirit would produce in the elders and members of this congregation the specific quality of gentleness that distinguishes restorative discipline from punitive condemnation, the gentleness that says, by its very quality, that this is not a judgment but a rescue.

Pray for any specific members of this congregation who may be in patterns of serious, persistent sin that have not yet been pastorally addressed. Pray without naming them publicly, their situations deserve the confidentiality that the private stages of the process require, but pray with genuine pastoral specificity for the Spirit to work in their hearts toward genuine repentance before formal discipline becomes necessary. Pray for the specific members who may need to initiate the private address of Matthew 18:15 but have not yet done so out of fear or uncertainty. And pray for the elders who may already be engaged in pastoral conversations that are moving in the direction of the formal discipline process, for their wisdom, their perseverance, their gentleness, and their unshakeable confidence that the goal is the winning of the brother who has gone astray.

Close with the prayer of the good shepherd: Lord, let it not be the will of Your Father that one of these little ones perishes. The congregation You have entrusted to these elders is Your flock, purchased with Your blood, indwelt

by Your Spirit, and promised the protection of the One who said that no one can snatch them out of the Father's hand. Let the discipline that this lesson has described be the expression of that promise in the life of this specific congregation: the community's refusal to watch its members walk toward destruction without pursuit, its commitment to the process that You prescribed for exactly these situations, and its confidence that the same Spirit who can raise the dead can restore the straying, break the unrepentant, and bring home the lost sheep to the joy of the Father who declared that it is not His will that one of these little ones perish.

“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: Matthew 18:15–20; 1 Corinthians 5:1–13; Galatians 6:1; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14–15; Titus 3:10–11; 1 Timothy 5:19–20

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Dr. Joshua Nichols

josh@faithfultotheword.com | faithfultotheword.com