

# The Necessity of Church Discipline

Deuteronomy 11:8–28; 2 Thessalonians 3:6–9

The title of my message today is “The Necessity of Church Discipline.”

A lot of churches today, in an effort to be more welcoming, more inclusive, and more “loving,”<sup>1</sup> have neglected to practice church discipline. They want to be happy, clappy places where people enjoy themselves, accept one another and get along. They want to avoid appearing scolding or judgmental. They do not want to be divisive. They may conclude that one can draw more flies with honey than with vinegar, and that is true. They might rationalize their neglect of practicing church discipline by thinking that they are being more evangelistic—reaching more people for Christ. Yet for a church to neglect church discipline, as we shall see, is actually to be disobedient to Christ and incur his eternal displeasure. Jesus is the Lord of his church. The Bible is *his* word, “the word of Christ.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus is “the wisdom of God”<sup>3</sup>—wisdom incarnate. We must not assume that we are wiser than God. To assume that we can reach more people for Christ by refusing to exercise church discipline—something ordained by Christ—is to assume that we are wiser than God. It is arrogance, conceit, disobedience.

I have three points this morning: (1) a divine command; (2) an apostolic example, (3) a present duty. First,

## 1. A divine command

I’m going to spend the bulk of this sermon on this first point. Note that our text begins: “We command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us.”

The key word here is the adverb “disorderly” (ἀτάκτως), which is formed with the negative particle α plus a derivative of τάσσω, which means *put in proper order*. This word is used only twice, and only in this chapter. Its other use is in verse 11, where it is translated “walk . . . in a *disorderly* manner.” There is a related adjective, ἄτακτος, *not in proper order*; verb, ἀτακτέω, *be disorderly*, used in verse 7; and the noun τάξις, *order*.

The word “walk” (περιπατέω) is a common word (as you might expect, since humans do a lot of walking), used some 96 times in the New Testament, meaning *go about, walk around*. It has both a literal meaning (e.g., referring to the scribes, who loved to *walk about* in long robes<sup>4</sup>) and a figurative meaning (e.g., “*walk in love*,”<sup>5</sup> meaning one’s *manner of life*, its usage here). The Apostle is telling us not

---

<sup>1</sup> But cf. Prov. 3:12, Heb. 12:6!

<sup>2</sup> Col. 3:16

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. 1:24

<sup>4</sup> Luke 20:46

<sup>5</sup> Eph. 5:2

to walk disorderly; he wants us to live *ordered* lives—not haphazard but intentionally ordered to the glory of God. All the decisions that we make, all the choices that we make, all the relationships that we enter into, are to bring glory to the God who chose us and gave us a purpose: to glorify God, that whether we eat, or drink, or whatever we do, we are to do it “to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). When a builder builds a tower, or when a king goes to war, he should start with a plan. Does he have all the necessary materials and manpower? Likewise, we commoners should give careful thought to the kinds of things we attempt. We should “make it our aim . . . to be well pleasing to Him” (2 Cor. 5:9).

To return to the word *disorderly*, notice that it is composed of three elements, the negative particle (*dis-*), the base word (*order*), and the suffix (*-ly*). Now here is the interesting part: the second element (*τακτός*, *order*) comes into English in the word *taxonomy*,<sup>6</sup> which refers to the orderly classification of plants and animals according to their presumed natural relationships. Taxonomy was developed by Carl Linnaeus, an eighteenth century Swedish biologist and physician. Linnaeus created the modern system of classifying organisms into domains, kingdoms, phyla, classes, orders, families, etc.

Note the word *order*. The Bible teaches that God is a God of order. As we look at the world around us (or to the heavens up above) we can clearly see that God is a God of order. Psalm 8 begins with the words “The heavens declare the glory of God.” As we look at the stars above or the plants, animals and minerals here below we notice relationships. For instance, there are different color squirrels, but they are all squirrels. Going further, we might begin to think: how is a squirrel related to a chipmunk? We all profit from the work of biologists and naturalists who study these animals.

As I was working on this sermon I spied a pile of silverware on the kitchen counter. Norma was emptying the dishwasher, and I wanted to help her, so I put the silverware away in the silverware drawer. If you have a lot of silverware it is helpful to put it into bins—the forks in one bin, the knives in another, and the spoons in a third. That way, when you need a spoon, you can find all the spoons in one place, rather than rummaging through a pile of undifferentiated pieces. Just think how long it would take to set a table for a large group if the silverware were not organized! God is a God of order, and nature itself teaches us that God intends for us to live orderly lives.

The work of the church especially is to be orderly; in another place the Apostle tells us, “Let all things be done decently and in order (*τάξις*)” (1 Cor. 14:40).

Those followers of Christ, then, who “walk disorderly” are dishonoring God by not intentionally living their lives in a way that reflects the order of the Trinity—

---

<sup>6</sup> A combination of *τάξις* (from *τακτός*) and *νόμος*

one God, eternally existing in three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Pulling together the teachings of Scripture from a number of texts, both in the Old Testament and the New, we know that the Bible teaches that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are equal as to their nature, or being. The Father is God, the Son is God, the Spirit is God. This is called the *ontological* Trinity, from the Greek word meaning *being*. But as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit relate to one another, we know that the Father *sends* the Son, the Son is *sent* by the Father, and the Spirit *proceeds* from the Father and the Son. This is called the *economic* Trinity, and has to do with the relations between the Persons of the Trinity.

God wills that we humans—people created in the image of God—likewise relate to one another: husbands and wives, parents and children, employers and employees, church elders and members of the congregation. People enter into relationships with one another, choosing an employer, hiring an employee, entering into marriage, deciding to start a family, raising children, professing faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, receiving members into the church, and many other relationships. Those who do not know the Lord often live promiscuous lives, becoming intimate without entering into permanent marriage, sometimes having many partners indiscriminately. But those who know their Bible know that this is not God’s plan for the flourishing of the human race. “The LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him”—that is, a helper fit for him.<sup>7</sup> The husband should love his wife, protect her, provide for her, and be her companion. The wife should respect her husband, help him in his God-given calling, submit to him and be his companion. Both husband and wife should pursue their respective roles intentionally, to the glory of God, endeavoring to fulfill God’s plan for marriage and serve as a model and testimony to the world. As our Lord put it, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

Those who are single likewise are required to provide for our own needs, working honestly and intentionally so that Christ is glorified and so that we can help those who are unable to provide sufficiently for themselves.

To fail to live in such a manner is to “walk disorderly.” None of us does this perfectly. We all fail to measure up and carry out this duty to perfection. That is why we need the gospel. We are sinners. We fall short of God’s perfect pattern for humanity. We need a Savior. Christ is that Savior. He is the God-man who perfectly kept God’s law on behalf of his people. The Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all. He went to the cross and died for us, bearing our sins in his own body on the tree. He rose again the third day for our justification. His perfect righteousness is

---

<sup>7</sup> Gen. 2:18

credited to those who believe. Empowered by his Spirit, we are enabled to live holy lives in gratitude to him.

With this background, consider once again our text: “We command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who *walks disorderly* and not according to the tradition which he received from us.”

There are two other words that we should consider. First, is the word “withdraw.” Other versions have “keep away.” “Withdraw” is preferable, for it clearly indicates the severing of a previous relationship. “Keep away” might imply that a person who walks disorderly, and not according to the gospel, should not be received as a member of the church; but “withdraw” indicates that a professing Christian who refuses to walk in an orderly manner and live an obedient life that reflects well on the Lord Jesus Christ should be disciplined, that is, removed from the fellowship of communicant members of the church. Of course, such a removal should not happen hastily, on a moment’s notice, but carefully, deliberately and prayerfully, following due order. The disorderly member should be patiently confronted and instructed from the Scriptures. If he does not amend his ways but continues in his sin after multiple warnings, he should be suspended from the sacraments. If he still doesn’t correct his behavior, he should be excommunicated from the fellowship. Even then, he is allowed to attend services and sit under the preaching of the gospel—just not be regarded as a communicant member. The church should pray for his repentance, in the hope that he would come to his senses and ask to be restored to repentance.

The other word that we should consider is “we command you.” I’m not going to go into depth here, as it should be self-evident, but notice that this is a *command*—a command meant to be obeyed. As a command, it is an expression of God’s will for his church.

Our Old Testament text this morning was from Deuteronomy 11, where Moses, at the end of his life, addresses the people of Israel. If you were keeping track, five times in this text Moses says, “I command you”—more than anywhere else in the Bible. Five times he says, “I command you . . . I command you . . . I command you . . . I command you . . . I command you.” Do we detect a pattern here?

In our text Moses commands the people of God. Did he have authority to command the people?

The Bible says, “Obey *them* that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for *they* watch for your souls, as they that must give account” (Heb. 13:17). I have made the point before, and it is a very important point, that the Bible says, “Obey *them*.” It never says “Obey him” without qualification. God does not tell us to render unconditional obedience to any man—parent, pastor, pope.

Parents have authority to command their children to obey righteous commands. Pastors and preachers have authority to command their hearers to obey God. The Bible nowhere authorizes a pope. The church has no authority to designate anyone a pope. Therefore, God does not require obedience to anyone calling himself pope. It is not a biblical office. End of discussion. There are three biblical offices: pastor, ruling elder and deacon. Parents and church elders have authority to require obedience to lawful commands, that is, commands that are in accord with God's word. They may *not* make up commands on their own authority. Christ alone is Lord of the church. He rules by his word and Spirit. God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any way contrary to his Word.<sup>8</sup> No person on earth has authority to command another person to disobey God, either by commission or by omission. No person on earth has authority to command another person to tell a lie—a sin of commission. No person on earth has authority to keep a person from attending the public worship of God—a sin of omission.

Now Moses said, “I command you.” Did he have authority to command the people? Not in himself as a private person. But he did have authority to command the people to obey God, and this is what he did in our Old Testament text. He commanded God's people to “love the LORD your God and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul” (v. 13), to “love the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways, and to hold fast to Him” (v. 22), not to “turn aside from the way which I command you today, to go after other gods” (v. 28). Did Moses have authority to command these things? Without a doubt! Do preachers of the gospel in our day have authority to command these things? Again, without a doubt! Faithful preachers have authority to command people to do those things which are for their good, that enhance the glory of God, that are holy, just and good, and not for the preacher's personal enrichment.

You parents likewise have authority to command your children. You must teach them the word of God. You must have family worship, praying, singing, explaining and applying Scripture. Your children need to hear the gospel from your lips, as well as from the lips of a minister. They need to be warned that to disobey God is to invite his wrath and displeasure.

In our New Testament text Paul instructs the church to withdraw from disorderly members. This involves church discipline. Clearly, church discipline is a divine command. Secondly (and more briefly) church discipline is

## **2. An apostolic example**

Paul continues: “For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly among you; nor did we eat anyone's bread free of charge, but

---

<sup>8</sup> WCF 20.2, [https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter\\_20](https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_20)

worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you.”

As a good preacher, Paul sought to illustrate, not just proclaim the truth. A good sermon explains, illustrates and applies the Scriptures. Good illustrations drive home the truth, fix it in our hearts, help us to understand it, and make it memorable.

Paul did not have to look far for an illustration: he used *himself* as an illustration. Perhaps he anticipated his readers’ saying, *We hear what you are saying; can you show us what this looks like in real life?* Paul says, “nor did we eat anyone’s bread *free of charge*.” The ESV is clearer: “nor did we eat anyone’s bread *without paying for it*.” The KJV is a little more obscure: “neither did we eat any man’s bread *for nought*”—that is, for nothing. The Greek has “freely.”

Paul speaks of eating bread. Here is a figure of speech—synecdoche: part for the whole. “Bread” in this case refers not only to food but to whatever may be needful for survival. Clearly, people need their daily bread. Our Lord teaches us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” “Bread” here doesn’t mean bread only—food made of flour, water and yeast, mixed together and baked. Such a diet would not be balanced; it would not provide all the nutrients we need. Bread is delicious; clearly, “bread” means *food*, but most of us want a diet slightly more varied. In this context the bread for which we must pray and labor is whatever it is that we might need. Elsewhere Paul tells us, “My God shall supply all your *need* according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19)—*all* your need. We need food, clothing, shelter, electricity, water, reliable transportation. Dear child of God, your wise and loving heavenly Father knows that you have need of all these things! We are not to worry. Jesus taught, “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things” (Matt. 6:31–32).

Child of God, your heavenly Father doesn’t want you to worry. Rather, he wants you to pray and tell him what you need. Your greatest need is Christ. If you have all the riches of the world but do not have Christ, you are impoverished beyond measure. This verse is not saying that our prayers should be limited to food alone, but to anything that we have need for.

Do we have need of funds to pay for an unexpected breakdown or unexpected surgery? We are to pray and lay out our need before our loving heavenly Father. Just as an earthly father supplies his child’s need, so our heavenly Father will supply our every need.

We have considered (1) a divine command; and (2) an apostolic example; third, consider

### **3. A present duty**

Paul closes this paragraph with the words, “to make ourselves an example of how you should follow us.” The phrase “how you should follow” implies duty. Paul and his companions on the missionary team worked night and day. In the evenings they taught and preached, but they had their day job, laboring wherever they could find work, so as to earn their daily bread. Yet we don’t hear them complaining, “Here I am. I have a call to preach, but these people don’t value my work here as they should. I have to work all day long, so I don’t starve.” For Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, a call to missions did not promise a life of ease, but rather hardship. They did not say, “I’m a preacher, so people ought to respect me.” They lived a life of humility, laboring for bread, that they might offer the Bread of life. Scripture teaches, “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.”<sup>9</sup> Humility is the way of salvation. Pride is the way of damnation.

We’ll have more to say about this next week. Amen.

---

<sup>9</sup> James 4:10