

## The Aim of Discipline

Psalm 141; 2 Thessalonians 3:14–15

The title of my message this morning is “The Aim of Discipline.” The type of discipline that the apostle is speaking about in these verses is church discipline.

Now it’s possible that some of you might be thinking something like: “Great! A sermon on church discipline—the doctrine of the church. Couldn’t we have something more inspiring?” Yet remember that “all scripture is given by inspiration by God.” All Scripture, rightly understood, points to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It was the Spirit of *Christ* who inspired these words, who put this topic in the Bible, and it is for our benefit. This is a concept that our loving heavenly Father want us to understand. A well-ordered church is for the benefit of God’s people. This truth is expressed in both testaments: from the book of Proverbs, “Whom the LORD loveth he *correcteth*; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth” (Prov. 3:12). Again, from the book of Hebrews, “whom the Lord loveth he *chasteneth*, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth” (Heb. 12:6). Do not miss the point: chastening and correction are evidences of God’s *love*. If God put you into a loving family, that is evidence of his love. And if God put you into a loving *church* family, that is evidence of his love. If you have loving parents, they want you to grow up to know right and wrong—to be well-behaved. They want the best for you. They know that you will have a happier life. And in the same manner, your wise and loving heavenly Father wants you to know right and wrong, and to be well-behaved; and his plan for the church is that we might have mutual accountability, that we might be under the discipline and oversight of godly elders who love us, who want the best for us, and to want us to know and understand both *right doctrine* and *right living*. If our *thinking* conforms to the Bible and our *manner of life* conforms to the Bible, then we will be happy indeed. If, as children, we start to go astray, and loving parents bring us back, then we are happy. If, as adults, we start to go astray, and loving elders bring us back, then we are happy. “*Blessed*—that is, *happy!*—is the people whose God is the LORD.” As it is expressed in our Old Testament text this morning, “Let the righteous *strike* me; it shall be a kindness. And let him *rebuke* me; it shall be as excellent oil; let my head not refuse it” (Ps. 141:5). Permissive *parents*, who let their children get away with disobedience, are doing their children no favor, and permissive *churches*, that let their people get away with disobedience, without earnestly and lovingly seeking to draw them back into the right way, are doing their people no favor either. If church members believe false doctrine or live disobedient lives, loving church leaders, under the oversight of our loving Lord, seek to correct them. It is for their good—and for their ultimate blessing. If a church says, in effect, “You can believe anything you want and live any way you want, and still come to the Lord’s table,”

that is not a *good* thing, it is not a *loving* thing. It is teaching their people that correct doctrine and godly living don't matter—and that is not true.

The bottom line: church discipline has *everything* to do with love. It is something that all of us must value, because our loving heavenly Father values it. So, don't think that that a sermon on church discipline is uninspiring. It is an integral part of God's truth. Learn it well; it is for your good.

So let's get started. Here again is our New Testament text: "If anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." I have four points this morning: (1) The epistles are God's word, and to be obeyed. (2) Believers are to "keep company" with the church; their membership status is to be duly recorded and reviewed. (3) Each of us should live in such a way that we will not be ashamed before God. (4) Discipline should be done with the aim of restoration. First,

### **1. The epistles are God's word, and to be obeyed.**

Note once again the first part of our text: "If anyone does not obey our word in this epistle . . . ."

Now the word *epistle* means *letter*. The Greek word, ἐπιστολή, means *something that is sent*. It is related to *apostle*, *a man who is sent*. The word *epistle* refers to the letters included in the New Testament, but it also can refer more generally to a formal or elegant letter. So here we have the apostle Paul, writing an epistle or formal letter to the church, and referring to this very letter as an epistle. And what he says is, "If anyone does not obey our word in this epistle . . . ." Note well that the apostle Paul expects that what he is writing in this letter is to be *obeyed*. What he is writing is not optional, but mandatory. Clearly, if it is mandatory, then it must be the word of God, not man. It has divine authority.

When a parent tells his child, "You must be back by 10 PM," that has authority. It is as though he is saying: "I'm the parent, you're the child. I'm the head of this house, and you live in my house. You are under my authority—get that! As long as you live here, as long as I am providing for you, you are going to have live under my rules. Now someday you are going to move away. You are going to establish your own home, you are going to pay your own way."

Through the years, as I have talked with parents who were heartbroken over wayward children, I have stated the principle: if you live here, you are going to live under my rules. If I'm financially supporting you, you are going to live under my rules. I endeavor to be a godly father, and I expect my children to live godly lives. If you choose to sin, you are going to have to do that on your own dime. While you live in my house, or if you are away at college and accepting financial support from me, you are going to have to live under my rules. If you don't like my rules, then move out and pay your own way.

Such straight talk might seem harsh to some, but it is biblical. Godly parents want their children to live godly lives. They know the biblical principle, “the way of transgressors is hard” (Prov. 13:15). Yes, the way of the transgressor is hard! If a young man or woman chooses to live a disobedient life, it is going to be hard for him or her. Run around with the wrong crowd, and it is going to be hard for you. Abuse alcohol or drugs, and it is going to be hard for you. Become sexually intimate outside the bounds of marriage, and it is going to be hard for you. Live the party life, and neglect work and responsibility, and it is going to be hard for you. Live beyond your means, and it is going to be hard for you. Go into debt to pay for current expenses, and it is going to be hard for you. Choose evil companions, and it is going to be hard for you. A Christian parent wants his children to succeed in life, to make something of their lives. As the apostle John put it, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.”<sup>1</sup> For a Christian parent to have a godly son or daughter is the greatest joy in the world.

Contrariwise, as we read in Deuteronomy, “If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and who, when they have chastened him, will not heed them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city, to the gate of his city. And they shall say to the elders of his city, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.’ Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death with stones; so you shall put away the evil from among you, and all Israel shall hear and fear” (Deut. 21:18–21).

So in our text this morning the apostle Paul writes, “If anyone does not obey our word in this epistle . . .” He is not giving merely his own opinion. He is writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He is setting forth teachings that are true and requirements for living that are true. These are the commands of God, requiring universal obedience. Those who choose to obey them will be blessed. Those who choose to disobey them will be cursed. They are not optional. They are the command of God. They are the law of God. The requirements set forth in the epistles are just as binding as the requirements set forth in the books of Moses. This is the word of God, and it is to be believed and obeyed. The biblical epistles are the inspired word of God. Secondly,

**2. Believers are to “keep company” with the church; their membership status is to be duly recorded and reviewed.**

Look at our text again: “if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, *note* that person and do not *keep company* with him.”

Here is an implied command that all believers in Christ are to be part of a local church. The Greek word used by the apostle Paul, and translated “keep company,”

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<sup>1</sup> 3 John 4

means *to associate, to be in the company of*,<sup>2</sup> *mix together with*. The church is a fellowship of God's people. We gather together to worship, to meet with Christ, to hear his word read and preached, to sit at his feet and learn from him, to respond in love and obedience, to sing his praises, to hear his law, to confess our sins, to hear his word of pardon and acceptance in Christ, to profess our faith together, to fellowship together around the Lord's table, to receive his body and blood, to receive his parting blessing. Such are the rich blessings enjoyed by the church.

A lot of people—especially Americans—are content to be “internet Christians,” to associate together via social media and video chat, but never in real, face-to-face association. Now it should be evident that the possibility of being “internet Christians” could never have happened during Bible times, since electronic communications did not even exist. Yes, the church had letters, but sending one required finding a trusted person who would carry it for you, and getting a return letter might take months. Paul wrote letters (elegant and formal letters which we call *epistles*). He wrote lots of them. But in them he expressed, “I long to *see* you” (Rom. 1:11). He enjoyed writing, and he was good at it. But he sorely missed face-to-face fellowship, especially when he was imprisoned.

Brothers and sisters: we were created for intimate spiritual fellowship both with God and with his people. This is what we were created for, and this is what is truly satisfying. God did not make us to be isolated, to live alone, to never get to spend quality time with flesh-and-blood brothers and sisters in Christ. This is the kind of fellowship that we enjoy in the church: “. . . truly our *fellowship* is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ,” wrote the apostle John, and “if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have *fellowship* one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.”<sup>3</sup> This is the kind of rich, satisfying fellowship that we enjoy as members of faithful local churches. This is the kind of rich, satisfying fellowship that we will enjoy with the saints in the physical presence of our Lord Jesus Christ in the courts of heaven forevermore. This is what we were made for. God made man after his own image and put him in the Garden of Eden to *fellowship* with him in the cool of the day. This is the fellowship that was lost through sin; this is the fellowship that is regained through the gospel. This is the fellowship that will be experienced forevermore as we sing the praises of God eternally with his bride, the church. If you love Christ, why would you *not* want to be a part of it! If you do not love Christ, then you know nothing about it, and are content to be alone. Maybe you like to be alone now, so you can enjoy your sinful habits without anyone seeing you. But if you die in your sins, you will be forever in outer darkness, alienated, alone in the bleakness of your own misery

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<sup>2</sup> Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, συναναμίγνυμι (Logos Bible Software)

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 1:3, 7

forevermore. You will hear the constant shrieks and wailing of the damned, but there will be no comfort, no solace, no reassurance, no love, no acceptance—only eternal alienation.

Not only is it our duty to be part of the fellowship and membership of the church, it is also incumbent that we be in submission to the elders. “Obey them that have the rule over you, and *submit yourselves*: for they watch for your souls” (Heb. 13:17). In our text this morning, the elders who watch over the souls of the saints are admonished to “*note that person.*” The word here means *note down, write, mark, take special notice of*.<sup>4</sup> This clearly implies the existence of a church *roll*, of a written record of those in the fellowship of a particular local church. Jesus told us to “rejoice, because your names are written in heaven.”<sup>5</sup> The apostle John wrote of those whose names “are not *written* in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.”<sup>6</sup> Our risen and exalted Lord keeps an eternal and authoritative master list of all his elect who are part of his church in heaven (by the way, there is *one* church, made up of all the elect, not *two* churches, an Old Testament church made up of believers and their children, and a New Testament church which *excludes* children—but that is a subject for another sermon.

But the point emphasized in our text this morning is that the elders of the church have a written list of all the members, and that when a member persists in disobeying the command of God through the apostles, the elders are put on notice to “*note that person*” and not to “keep company” with him. In other words, he is to be put under discipline. This can be a long, painstaking and tedious process. It can involve a formal rebuke or admonition, a trial, a finding of guilt, and formal discipline. That discipline can take the form of denying an accused person the right of participating in the Lord’s Supper, or of performing the functions of his office, until the case is concluded.<sup>7</sup> If guilt is established, it can take the form of suspension from the sacraments, or excommunication: being banned from the Lord’s table according to the word of Christ, “if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.”<sup>8</sup>

Sin is messy! How much better for all of us to live in loving submission to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, walking in love with one another.

If a person is disobedient, then Paul says, “note that person and do not keep company with him.” The ESV misses the mark here: “have *nothing* to do with him.” NASB is better: “do not associate with him.” The point is that the text is not telling us that we can absolutely *never* speak with a disobedient person; as a matter

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<sup>4</sup> Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, σημειῶ (Logos Bible Software)

<sup>5</sup> Luke 10:20

<sup>6</sup> Rev. 13:8

<sup>7</sup> OPC Book of Discipline IV.A.1.d, <https://opc.org/BCO/BD.html>

<sup>8</sup> Matt. 18:17

of fact the next verse, as we shall see shortly, tells us to do just that: “do not count him as an enemy, but *admonish* him as a brother.” To admonish him requires speaking with him! If we meet a disobedient brother on the street, or if we get together for coffee, or talk together at a family reunion, that is not the same as having church fellowship with him, as fellowshiping together at the Lord’s table.

Up to this point we have seen that the epistles are God’s word, and to be obeyed, and that believers are to “keep company” with the church; their membership status is to be duly recorded and reviewed. Thirdly,

### **3. Each of us should live in such a way that we will not be ashamed before God.**

Again, consider the words of our text: “note that person and do not keep company with him, *that he may be ashamed.*” The dictionary defines *shame* as a *painful emotion caused by consciousness of guilt*. The sad fact is that sin brings shame upon a person, a family, a church, a nation. When Adam and Eve sinned, they became conscious of their nakedness, implying shame. If you or I were to go out in public naked, we would be ashamed. When Moses went up Mount Sinai for forty days to receive the law, and God’s people engaged in revelry and dancing, it is noted that this was “to their *shame* among their enemies” (Ex. 32:25). The word *shame* (הַצְּרָפָה) refers to a *derisive whisper*; their unbecoming conduct at the foot of Sinai was *whispered about* by their enemies, who were too embarrassed to speak in a normal voice, lest their children overhear. Elsewhere Paul writes that it is *shameful* even to speak of the things that the wicked do in secret (Eph. 5:12).

Sin brings shame. When we sin, we don’t want people to notice. This is why much sin is committed at night, or in secret. But all things are open and laid bare before our Lord, who knows everything—*every* dirty little secret. Nothing can be hid from him. The ultimate shame is to be found *naked*, and not clothed with the righteousness of Christ, at the final judgment. This is why we want to live God-honoring lives before the Lord. The apostle John counsels, “And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be *ashamed* before him at his coming.”<sup>9</sup> Finally,

### **4. Discipline should be done with the aim of restoration.**

Verse 15 has “do not count him as an enemy, but *admonish* him as a brother.” The ESV says more simply, “*warn* him as a brother.” There is an important point here: the purpose of discipline, whether in the family or in church, is *restoration*. When the church suspends a member from the sacraments or excommunicates him from the fellowship, it does not cease to love him or her. It does not have the attitude *good riddance, glad you are gone!* We do not treat the members of Christ as an annoyance. We highly esteem them. When they sin, we grieve. We earnestly

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<sup>9</sup> 1 John 2:28

desire repentance and reconciliation. Christ died to reconcile the world to himself. We pray for the lost. We pray that God might open their hearts to the gospel. We pray in the words of Paul: “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be *reconciled* to God.”<sup>10</sup> We look forward to the day when the church will be complete, when Christ will have reconciled all things—both things on earth and things in heaven—to himself, when the peace made through the blood of his cross will be complete.<sup>11</sup>

The only way to have peace with God and peace with our neighbor is through Christ. If you are not reconciled to him, then look to Christ and be saved. The aim of church discipline is to *restore* the offender and bring him back into fellowship with Christ and his people. Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> 2 Cor. 5:20

<sup>11</sup> Col. 1:20