Section 2 - Church Discipline

Matt. 18:15-20

Jesus had issued an appropriate warning to those listening to Him about offending the little ones. Then He proceeded to tell them how to act when they were not the ones who were offending others, but the ones who were being offended. In this part of His message, He was looking to the future rather than the present. Jesus was reflecting about the coming time when the kingdom - that is, the church - would be in actual existence as an organized community. The Twelve would be exercising authority as Apostles. So He gave directions for exercising discipline for the purity and well-being of the Christian community (Mt. 18:15-17). He granted to the Twelve as a group what He had already granted to Peter alone - the power to bind and loose. This meant they had the power to impose and remove church censures (vs. 18). He also encouraged them by making a promise - the promise of His own spiritual presence. In addition, He reassured them that they would prevail with His heavenly Father in prayer when they came together in His name and agreed on the things they were asking Him (vss. 19-20). His ultimate goal was to insure beforehand that the community to be called by His name would truly be a holy, loving, and united fellowship.

The rules that He laid down were to guide the Apostles in dealing with offenders. They were simple and plain. However, they have been greatly debated among religious leaders who are more interested in advocating the different theories of church government. Nothing will be said about these ecclesiastical arguments here. Nor do we think it is necessary to comment on our Lord’s words, except for a sentence to explain the phrase used by Him to describe excommunication: “Let him” (that is, the unrepentant brother who is about to be cast out of the church) “be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer.” Without a doubt, these words were quite clear at the time they were spoken. But they are not so clear now. Yet their meaning, for the most part, is sufficiently plain. Here is the idea: The offender who remains unrepentant is not to have religious fellowship with the one he offended, nor with anyone in the church. In addition, he is to have as little social fellowship as possible. The religious aspect of excommunication is stated in the expression “as a Gentile,” and the social side of it is expressed in the second clause of the sentence, “and a tax-gatherer.” Gentiles were excluded from the temple and had no part in Jewish religious ceremonies. Tax-gatherers were not excluded from the temple, as far as we
know, but they were regarded as social outcasts by all Jews concerned with patriotism and religious strictness. Their dislike of the whole class of people could not be justified, nor do we approve of it here. Jesus simply refers to it as a matter of fact. He conveniently and clearly conveyed what He meant. In essence, He was saying to them, “Treat the unrepentant offender in the same way that the Jews, by law, treat the non-Jews, as people with whom you are not to have religious fellowship. And treat this unrepentant offender in the same way that the tax-gatherers are treated by the Pharisees, who have such deep-seated prejudice against them, as people who are to be excluded from all but the unavoidable socializing.”

We may not understand all of the details that are to be attached to the rules about managing discipline. But there can be no doubt at all about the fact that the loving Holy Spirit permeates the rules.

The spirit of love appears in Jesus’ conception of the church and is foundational to these rules about discipline. The church is viewed as a body of people in which the concern of one is the concern of all, and *vice versa*. Therefore, Jesus is not specific about the type of offenses He has in mind. They could be private and personal ones, or ones that are scandalous. The latter are those which are committed against the church as a whole. It was not necessary for Him to explain the various types of offenses, because the distinction between personal and scandalous sins, for the most part, has ceased to exist. An offense against the conscience of the whole community is an offense against each individual member, because he is jealous for the honor of the whole body of believers. On the other hand, an offense, which at first is private and personal, becomes one in which all are concerned when the offended party fails to bring his brother to confession and reconciliation. When two Christians remain estranged, it will be regarded, in a church that has the mind of Christ, as a scandal which cannot be tolerated. This kind of situation threatens to cause deadly harm to the spiritual life of everyone involved.

**The Order For Proceeding**

The *order* for proceeding in discipline cases is compatible with the spirit of love. This is clear from the directions given by Jesus. First, the offended party is directed to deal with the offending brother in strict privacy. Then, after this has been tried and has failed, third parties are to be brought in as witnesses. They are to assist in the work of reconciliation. Finally, and only as a last resort, the problem is to be made public and brought before the whole church. This procedure obviously shows consideration for the offender: (1) It makes confession as easy as possible for him; (2) it spares him the shame of exposure; (3) it is a method which cannot be worked out without pure and holy motives on the part of the one who is seeking to rectify the situation; (4) it does not leave any room for reckless conversations among those who love scandals. These are people who love to divulge bad news and speak to everyone about a fellow-believer’s faults.
rather than speaking directly to him; (5) it puts a bridle on resentment by forcing the offended party to be patient in dealing with his brother or sister before it gets to the point where they are totally estranged. When that happens, anger immediately surfaces; (6) the procedure also gives no encouragement to those who are nosy and over-zealous - those who are like busybodies, always trying to dig up offenses. Their way is not to start with the offender and then go to the church. Rather, they go directly to the church with serious charges, usually based on hearsay. More than likely, they obtained the information in a devious way.

It was characteristic of the loving spirit of Jesus, the Head of the church, that He was horrified at the possibility that anyone who was a believer could become like a Gentile or tax-collector to other believers. He wanted His disciples to meditate on this. This was apparent from Christ’s insistence that everything should be done to avoid a catastrophe. In this respect, His mind was so unlike that of the world. With perfect composure, the world could allow vast multitudes of people to be what Gentiles were to Jews and what tax-gatherers were to Pharisees - people who were excluded from communion! Can’t we say that there are many in the church today who do not have the mind of Jesus in this matter? They treat Christians who are together in the same fellowship with total indifference and have practiced this evil so long that they consider it to be natural and right - and they have no regrets about it!

Such heartless indifference demonstrates a different standard for the church than that which was cherished by its Founder. There are people who do not think that fellowship in a church imposes any obligation to love their Christian brothers and sisters. Consciously or unconsciously, they think of the church as if it were a hotel, where all kinds of people meet for a brief time, sit down together at the same table, and then leave, not knowing nor caring anything about each other. In truth, the church is a family, whose members are all believers who are constrained to passionately love one another with a pure heart. Of course, this hotel theory leads to the logical conclusion that discipline must not be practiced. For, strange as the idea may seem to many, the law of love is the basis of church discipline. It is because I am obligated to receive every member of the church as a fellow believer that I not only have the privilege, but also the responsibility, of being genuinely concerned about his behavior. If a Christian friend says to me, “You must love me with all of your heart,” I am obligated to reply, “I acknowledge the obligation theoretically, but I demand that you be the kind of person that I can love as a Christian, however weak and imperfect you may be. I feel that it is both a privilege and a responsibility to do all I can to make you worthy of this kind of love. I will seek to do this by dealing with you in a straightforward manner concerning your offenses. I am willing to love you, but I cannot, I dare not, condone your sins. If you refuse to repent of them and virtually require me to commit the same sins by having me pretend they don’t exist, then our fellowship must come to an end, and I am free from my obligations.” The people who hold to the hotel theory of church fellowship are absolute
strangers to such language and thinking. They deny the obligation to love their brothers and sisters and, at the same time, renounce the right to insist that it is absolutely necessary that fellow believers have Christian virtue as the basis of having church membership. These people refuse to be bothered about the behavior of any member, unless it somehow affects them personally. They allow everyone to think and act as they please - whether they are atheists or believers, sons of God or sons of Satan; it is all the same to them.

**Strictness and Love**

In these instructions by our Lord, there is a place for holy strictness as well as for tender, considerate love. Jesus solemnly gives approval to excommunicate an offender who is not repentant. With the tone of a judge who is pronouncing a sentence of death, Jesus says, “...let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer” (Mt. 18:17). Then, in order to ensure that the church censures are righteously carried out and invested with all seriousness and authority, He declares that they carry eternal consequences with them. He adds in His most emphatic way the awful words (awful both to the sinner who is cast out and to those who are responsible for his ejection), “Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven” (Mt. 18:18). On the one hand, these words may be considered as a caution to church leaders so they will be careful how they use such tremendous power. But they also clearly demonstrate that Christ desired His church on earth to resemble, as closely as possible, the church in heaven. Her membership should be holy, rather than a mixed congregation of righteous and unrighteous people, believers and atheists, Christians and non-Christians. So, in order to achieve these purposes for His church, He committed the power of the keys to those who bear office in His house. He authorized them to deliver the proud, stubborn sinner, who refuses to be corrected, over to Satan’s bondage and to appease the injured consciences of his brothers and sisters in Christ.

Such sternness seems to be void of compassion, at least from all outward appearances. However, it really is merciful to all parties. It is merciful to the faithful members of the church, because it removes a diseased limb whose presence threatens the life of the whole body. Scandalous, open sin cannot be tolerated in any organization without the people becoming demoralized, especially in the church, which is an organization whose very reason for existence is the cultivation of Christian virtue. The seemingly uncompassionate sternness is also merciful toward the unfaithful who are the originators of the sin. To keep scandalous offenders inside the communion of the church is to do your best to damn their souls and to exclude them ultimately from heaven. On the other hand, it could be that by delivering them over to Satan, they would receive a foretaste of hell now so that they might not go to hell forever. This should be our hope. It was out of this hope that Paul insisted on the excommunication of the person who committed incest in the Corinthian church. By admonishing him for committing such a sin, “his spirit may be saved in
the day of the Lord Jesus” (I Cor. 5:5). It is this hope that comforts those who have the unpleasant task of enforcing church censures. It is a painful responsibility to carry out. But they can cast out evil-doers from the communion of Christians with less hesitation if they know that the ones who are excommunicated - the tax-gatherers and sinners - are nearer the kingdom of God than they were as church members. They will also be comforted by the fact that they are still allowed to pursue the very best for the ungodly, just as Christ sought what was good for all the outcasts in His day. It is in their power to pray for them and to preach to them as they stand in the outer court of the Gentiles. Yet, as the ungodly stand there, they may not put into their unholy hands the symbols of the Savior’s body and blood.

These considerations should help those who are sincerely concerned for the spiritual character of the church and for the well-being of individual souls. How? By encouraging them to remove many from the rolls of the church. There is no doubt that if church discipline were used efficiently and with strictness as Christ instructed us, reductions in the church rolls would take place on an extensive scale. It is true that the purging process could be taken to excess, thereby hurting people. Tares might be mistaken for wheat; and wheat, for tares. The church might be turned into a society of Pharisees, thanking God that they were not as other men, or as poor tax-gatherers who stood on the outside listening and praying, but not as members. Those who do not partake of communion might be unworthy. But there might also be many timid people who do not dare come to the table. Like the tax-gatherer in the parable, they could only stand off in the distance crying out, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” These are the ones who are justified; not the others. A system which tends to bring about these pharisaical results is one extreme to be avoided. But there is another extreme which is even more deadly and which also needs to be avoided. It is being carelessly lax. It allows sheep and goats to be gathered together into one fold. The goats are being encouraged to think of themselves as sheep and are deprived of being spoken to plainly as “unconverted sinners.”

**Multiplying Members**

This unnatural mixture of the godly with the godless is too common a practice in these days. We do not have to look very far to find the reason. It is not that the leadership is indifferent to morality, for that is not generally a characteristic of the church in our time. *It is the desire to multiply members.* The various religious bodies value members more than morality or high Christian virtue. They fear that if discipline is used, one or two names may be lost from their church rolls. There is some basis for this fear. Fugitives who run from discipline can always be sure that someone will open a door of welcome to them. This is one of the many curses that has fallen upon us by that greatest scandal of all time: religious divisions. Someone who has become, or is in danger of becoming, as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer to one church body, has a good chance of becoming a saint or an angel in another. Churches that compete with one another do not support each other.
One looses and another binds. In doing this, they make all spiritual sentences null and void, both in earth and heaven. They rob religion of all dignity and authority. Those who are morally unrestrained pray that the divisions of the church may last. While they continue, these people do well! However, it was different for them in the days when the church was universal and one. Those were the days when sinners who repented worked their way, slowly over the years, from the *locus lugentium* (outer portico; the place of the mourners or “weepers” until their heavy penance was over) outside the sanctuary through the *locus audientium* (inner portico; for all the unbaptized; for hearers, Jews, and pagans who could hear preaching and the reading of the Scriptures; they had to withdraw before the administration of the Holy Supper) and the *locus substratorum* (the upper place of the narthex for the kneelers who might participate in the prayers after the sermon) to the *locus fidelium* (the place of the faithful). It was a painful way to learn what an evil and bitter thing it is to depart from the living God.

The promise that is made to those who agree in prayer (Mt. 18:19-20) comes at an appropriate time. It is given in a message delivered to disciples who had been arguing over who would be the greatest. In this regard, the promise means, “As long as you remain divided by conflict and jealousy, you will be powerless with people and with God; you will also be unable as church leaders to carry out discipline and to bring your requests before the throne of grace in prayer. But if you will be united in your minds and in your hearts, you will have power with God and will succeed. My Father will grant your requests, and I myself will be in your midst.”

It is not necessary to assume that there is a close relationship between this promise and the subject that Jesus had just been addressing. In this familiar message, a transition is made from one topic to another in an easy conversational manner. He is careful to make sure that all that is said is relevant to the subject being discussed. The meeting is supposed to be convened in Christ’s name. Therefore, it does not need to consist of church officers assembling for the purpose of conducting church business. It can be a meeting held in a church or in a home solely for the purpose of worship. The promise holds for all people, all topics of prayer, all places, and all times. It is for all truly Christian gatherings, great and small.

The promise holds for the smallest number that can make it to the meeting - even for two or three. What is stressed here, with this small number, is the importance of Christians agreeing with one another. Jesus tells us that two who agree are better and stronger than twelve or a thousand who are divided by hatred and ambition. Cyprianus said, “The Lord, when He would commend unanimity and peace to His disciples, said, ‘If two of you shall agree on earth,’ etc., to show that most is granted not to the multitude, but to the concord of the suppliants.” An obvious inference is made, that if even two agree and are therefore strong, then a large group of people who are really united in their minds would be proportionately stronger. For we must
not think that God has any partiality for a little meeting, or that there is any virtue in a small number. Little, narrow sects are prone to fall into this trap. They imagine that Christ was thinking about them when He said two or three. They believe the kind of agreement Jesus desired was fanciful and whimsical. Ridiculous caricature of the Lord’s meaning! The agreement He requires of His disciples is not that everyone’s opinions are unanimous. Rather, He wants their minds and hearts to agree on the goals they are striving to reach. He also desires that all parties be unselfish in their commitment to these purposes. When He spoke of two or three, He did not contemplate that it would be desirable for the body of His church to be split into innumerable fragments because people who were so opinionated. Each fragment tends to believe that they will receive His presence and blessing in proportion to its smallness. He did not want His church to consist of a collection of clubs which do not have communion with each other, any more than He desired it to be a monster hotel which receives and boards all those who come without any questions being asked. He did not make the promise we are now considering to stimulate sectarianism. Rather, He wanted to encourage people to cultivate virtues which have always been too rare on earth - brotherly kindness, meekness, and love. The thing He values, in a word, is not the shortage of numbers, due to the lack of love. He values, instead, the union of hearts in humble love among the greatest number possible.