

**Characteristics of Faith Presbyterian Church No. 8**  
**“Church Discipline: Yes and No” Matthew 18:10-18**  
**June 18, 2017**  
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**Text Comment**

- v.15 Interestingly, the verb translated here “gained” is used elsewhere in the NT for the conversion of an unbeliever. So there is a sense in which a Christian brother or sister being recovered from sin *is like* a person becoming a Christian in the first place.
- v.16 Clearly you are still attempting to “gain” your brother. The function of the other brother or two is “to add force to the persuasion.” [France, 274]
- v.17 If he will not repent when two or three brothers confront him, then you are to tell the church. Even here the hope remains that this next measure of exposure will lead to his repentance and the conclusion of the matter. Only if he will not listen even to the church, must discipline follow and everybody learn what has happened. Gentiles and tax collectors were proverbially people from whom good Jews kept their distance. Jesus certainly did not share his fellow-countrymen’s contempt for Gentiles and tax collectors. Matthew was a tax collector. The Lord was using the phrase metaphorically to describe the ostracism that should follow. I imagine Matthew wrote that line with a wry smile. In England they speak of “sending someone to Coventry” to describe his being ostracized. It doesn’t mean that the user of the phrase has anything against the city of Coventry. [France, 275]

What is meant by “church” in this context? Many have thought that the church discipline envisaged is to be the decision of the entire congregation. Presbyterians and most others have argued that here “church” refers to the leadership of the church, the elders, the church in its representative form. Calvin, for example, paraphrases Matthew 18:17: “...he is to be called to the tribunal of the church, that is, the assembly of the elders.” [Inst. iv, xii, 2] The arguments for this interpretation are straightforward and persuasive. First, it was the practice in the Old Testament. In fact, frequently terms like “all Israel” or “the assembly” are, in context, found to refer only to the elders of the people. That is explicitly true in texts having to do with judgment and discipline. Second, it was the practice of the Jewish synagogue as well. It was not the membership of the synagogue that imposed discipline but the elders of the synagogue. [Str.-B., iv, 297] Third, as we will be reminded in the next verse, the power of the keys to open and shut the doors of the church, was just given in chapter 16 to the apostles and that authority would later be devolved upon the elders of the church.

- v.18 Apart from the “you” being plural, together with the verbs, the statement is virtually identical to that made to Peter in 16:19. The assembly as a whole, represented by its eldership, holds the authority bestowed by Christ upon his apostles. The repetition here of the same statement made to Peter and the apostles in regard to the judgment of the entire congregation, is a corrective to an overbearing and high-handed authoritarianism on the

part of the church's leadership. They are to execute only those judgments that the right-minded in the entire congregation would also approve. It is very interesting, indeed, that the matter being discussed does not even reach the councils of the church until all efforts that can be made by individual believers have been exhausted. The Lord, as the Apostle Paul after him, saw the church functioning as a body, with everyone actively engaged in the instruction, the encouragement, the correction, and the sympathetic support of everyone else.

Finally, we are reminded here that the judgments made by the church – assuming they are faithful to the Word of God and that the sin in question is genuinely a sin – will have been ratified in heaven. The verbs, as in chapter 16, are future perfects – “will have been.” Heaven is not subject to earth, but the church, if it abides by God's will, can be confident that it will render those judgments that have already been made in heaven. [Morris, 469] *In my experience, church members facing excommunication almost never take this promise seriously.*

- v. 20 In context, the two or three mentioned here are praying for the sinner whose situation has been described in the previous verses. The promise, of course, extends to many more situations than that, but it's important to remember that it was for that purpose that the statement was uttered in the first place.

We are at an important turning point in the history of this church, as we are now looking for the congregation's next senior pastor. To be honest, many churches – though few would admit this, I think – simply look for a man likely to be successful in his ministry, a man with gifts and graces sufficient to make for a popular and fruitful ministry. Whether or not they articulate this thought to themselves, they expect that the new minister will have his own plan and perhaps make changes to the church's practices. And no doubt the new minister *will* make changes. We not only expect that he will, but we want him to. We want to move forward and no one moves forward by remaining in the same place! However, very often new ministers reshape churches in ways that prove to be controversial or positively unhelpful. A minister may feel he needs to leave his own peculiar stamp on the life of the congregation. I know churches that have been jerked in this way or that with each new minister until there is little enthusiasm left for change of any kind. Here at Faith there are features of our congregational life and practice that are distinctive – that is, they are not shared even by other congregations in our own denomination, even our own presbytery – but, at the same time, we have come to believe they are very important, if not crucial. We want, we intend to retain them. We do not expect the new minister to change us in these respects, even as we don't expect him to alter the biblical message that is preached from this pulpit or our fundamental theological and ethical commitments as a Reformed and evangelical congregation. Some things *should* remain the same and we number the congregation's characteristics we have been considering in this evening series among those things. So, let me remind you what we have so far considered as the commitments of this congregation that we intend to preserve in the next generation of our church's life.

- 1) Reformed Catholicism: that is, intelligent, thoughtful, and unapologetic commitment to the theology and ethics of the Bible, which we understand are best represented in the Reformed

tradition, while maintaining and cherishing the unity of the whole church of God, no matter the wide-ranging theological disagreements that divide us from other Christians in so many ways.

2) Our approach to preaching with its concentration on the deep exposition of Holy Scripture and featuring, not exclusively but frequently, the consecutive exposition of books of the Bible.

3) The Christian family as an incubator of faith in the rising generation.

4) The singing voice of the congregation: that we intend to sing texts that rise to the standard set in the biblical psalter and the best tradition of Christian praise that are set to music, of whatever style, that serves those texts and elevates the congregation's praise and prayer as the best church music has always done.

5) The prayer meeting as the center of the church's ministry of corporate prayer and as the powerhouse of the church.

6) And, last time, the evening service on the Lord's Day as a second Sunday service.

Tonight I want to consider *the practice of church discipline*. Now perhaps you think this should not belong to this set of distinctives or characteristics since at least Presbyterian Church in America congregations are committed by church law to the practice of church discipline. That is true; they are so committed. Our *Book of Church Order*, to which all PCA ministers and elders pledge their obedience, includes an elaborate Book of Discipline and enjoins its practice in all our churches as a requirement of the Word of God.

Still, a quick perusal of the statistical reports from PCA presbyteries, published in the annual PCA yearbook, leaves the unmistakable impression that the church's rule may be honored more in the breach. A large number of presbyteries every year report no losses to their churches' membership through the exercise of church discipline. That is, in presbyteries that number thousands of church members, not a single member was excommunicated. Even in presbyteries where some such losses are reported the same impression is left. In one large presbytery with more than 13,000 members in its member congregations, only 9 members were lost to discipline and eight of those were from a single church of more than 7,400 members. In another presbytery of over 6,000 members not a single loss through discipline was recorded. (2014 statistics in the *2015 Yearbook*) Now, to be sure, excommunication is rightly expected to be a rare judgment. We had no excommunications last year or the year before that here at Faith and only 5 in the presbytery, which numbers over 4,300 members. Still, in the 2014 statistical year, there were only 186 losses to discipline denomination wide, out of a membership of 354,000. Most PCA insiders would admit to you that many of our churches do not practice church discipline, at least do not practice it faithfully. *We intend to remain among the churches that do.*

On the other hand, church discipline is sometimes practiced, but in a way less faithful to biblical teaching. It is sometimes imposed concerning matters and viewpoints about which faithful Christians may genuinely disagree. We had such a case in our presbytery some years ago. A member was excommunicated whose views hardly placed her outside the boundaries of Christian or even Reformed belief. The judgment of the session was rightly overturned by the presbytery when the verdict was appealed. Church censures sometimes descend into a clash of personalities and seem motivated chiefly by the determination of one party to get their way in a congregational dispute. And sometimes, alas, it turns into a spitting contest in which the Lord's name is employed by both sides, one of which cries "You can't fire me, I quit," while the other

yells back, “You can’t quit, you’re fired.” I’ve seen all of this myself through my forty years in the Presbyterian Church in America and in the Presbytery of the Pacific Northwest.

I began by reading the famous instructions of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 18, the most programmatic text in the Bible on the subject of church discipline. There is other evidence of the practice of discipline in the New Testament, of course. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul tells the Corinthian church to practice it in the case of a church member living with his step-mother and precisely what is to be done with him. In 1 Timothy 1:20 Paul refers to another such act of excommunication in which he had a part, this concerning two men who, he says, had made shipwreck of their faith, Hymenaeus and Alexander. In 2 Thessalonians 3 he refers to Christian brothers who had gone astray but seems there to suggest a less severe censure or sentence. In 1 Tim. 5:20 Paul writes, “As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.” And, of course, on several occasions in Paul’s letters and those of Peter, John, and Jude the church is ordered to cast out false teachers.

These texts, of course, do not occur in a vacuum. In the ancient Scriptures Israel was commanded to exclude from the community or actually to execute certain violators of the Law of God. In Deuteronomy 17 (vv. 2-13) – if we may say, the Matthew 18 of the Old Testament – Israel is told to take note of reports of serious disobedience, thoroughly to investigate them, and, if found to be true, to punish the offenders. The motivation, which is repeated several times in the OT law is given in these terms:

“And all the people shall hear and fear and not act presumptuously again.” [17:13]

That seems very like what Paul said in 1 Tim. 5:20. “Rebuke them in the presence of all so that the rest may stand in fear.” Church discipline should solemnize the church and create an expectation of obedience. All of these texts presuppose two essential facts of life. *The first is that God has published his law* that all men but especially all Christians are obliged to obey come wind, come weather. This is, alas, a biblical commonplace and emphasis that has gone by the wayside in much contemporary evangelical preaching and church life. *The second is that God’s saving grace leads to the transformation of life.* He saved us to do good works, to obey his commandments, to live worthy of the grace we have received. For that reason, as the Bible frequently reminds us, such sanctification, holiness of life, and obedient living is key evidence of living faith and salvation. If a person doesn’t do the will of his or her heavenly father, he or she will not be saved. As you remember, this was an emphasis of the Lord’s Sermon on the Mount.

It is these two facts that lie behind the practice of church discipline in the Bible:

- 1) Christians must be held to the standard of God’s law and must know that obedience is required of them if they are to be considered Christians. Churches that don’t practice church discipline may never say this, but by failing to censure open disobedience they leave in the minds of their members the unmistakable impression that you can be a Christian and not live like one. That impression is lethal to the faith of Christian children and, for that matter, the faith of all Christians.
- 2) And, therefore, if a professing Christian is unwilling to live in obedience to God’s Law he or she must be made to face the fact that a profession of faith is worthless if it is not

backed up by the demonstration of personal loyalty to God and Christ. It was the Lord himself who said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” It is this tough love of church discipline that sometimes is the only thing that will bring a Christian man or woman to his or her senses, to the realization that he or she is putting salvation itself in jeopardy.

Now, of course there are difficulties here. We are the first to admit it. Your elders know from personal experience how easy it is to read Matthew 18:15-20 and how devilishly hard it can be to know precisely how to apply it to the circumstances of life. It may sound simple, but anyone who has been a Christian for any length of time knows that this instruction the Lord gave his disciples is more complicated than it appears at first glance. It doesn't begin to answer all our questions, even the obvious ones. What sins is the Lord talking about? What sins are those which we ought to confront our brother or sister about? After all, you and I are sinning all the time. We are sinning by commission – doing what we should not – and sinning by omission – failing to do what we should. There is a world of sinning in the Christian life and so in the Christian church that the New Testament teaches us patiently to endure. Paul tells us that there were sins of thought and life in his churches that he closed his eyes to and bore patiently with reflective attention. There were certainly many sins in the Corinthian church and Paul enumerates a number of them in his first letter, serious sins, but he proposed church discipline for only one of them. Precisely what was the difference? There was, he admitted, a good bit of sin in his own life, but, so far as we know, he was never subjected to church discipline. Most Christians aren't. When does a sin reach that threshold that requires a brotherly confrontation? Jesus does not say. What about gossip or over-eating or crabbiness? And what of serious sins committed but immediately repented of? These are judgments that must be left to the Christian conscience, one hopes a conscience that is well instructed in the Word of God and tender toward both righteousness and love and to the wisdom of the elders of the church. And, if the sin is public, the judgment again must be made by elders who must determine whether the sin qualifies as a *scandal*, the technical term for a sin so egregious that it must be addressed by the church.

And then there is this question: are *all* situations to be handled in this way? Augustine confessed in one of his letters that he had difficulty knowing in some cases whether to follow Matthew 18:15 or 1 Tim. 5:20, where we read “Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning.” Paul rebuked Peter publicly in Antioch, and nothing is said to suggest that he had first followed the procedure outlined here in Matthew 18. How strictly are we to take the Lord's teaching here as outlining a process that *absolutely must be followed*? If you were to read accounts of cases of church discipline as they are handled in church courts – read them as I have read them in Presbytery minutes and General Assembly minutes – you would find that over and over again the offender seeks to shift culpability from himself to others because – it is almost a mantra – “they did not follow Matthew 18.” Matthew 18 has become the Christian's legal technicality, his loophole. And through the years many have hoped to escape punishment and some have actually escaped it by appeal to a breach of the procedure outlined here. They got off on a technicality in the same way a criminal does to whom the police forgot to read his rights. They committed the sin, but the procedures of Matthew 18 were not followed.

Or what of this question: what if there is no agreement between the two believers or the believer and the two or three, or even the believer and the church about his guilt or innocence. J.

Gresham Machen was suspended from the ministry of the Presbyterian Church in 1935 because he had the temerity to protest the church's support of missionaries who did not believe in the gospel of Christ. My father was deposed from the ministry of the PCUSA in effect for being a conservative in a liberal presbytery. I suppose none of us would think such censures proper, as if the censured person should publicly repent. But even at the level of congregational life, it is sometimes not so simple. Christians can have very different understandings of what a situation requires, the rights and wrongs of a course of behavior. One man's truth is another's cruelty; one man's betrayal is another man's wisdom. One's man's cowardice is another man's prudence. The Lord doesn't address such complications here. None of the passages in the NT that are related to this one address such complications. And, then, it is not always easy to learn the facts. In cases of marital discord this is sometimes a problem. "He said/she said" cases are not found only in civil and criminal court!

Or consider another question about which church sessions have differed through the years. What of a person who confessed faith in Christ, began walking as a Christian, thought himself a Christian, and was taken to be a Christian by the church and the other Christians he knew, but who, alas as sometimes happens, some years later throws over the faith; gives it up; repudiates it; and returns to the world. Is he a candidate for church discipline? That is, if a man has left the church of his own accord, has repudiated the Christian faith, should he then be excommunicated by the church? To what end? Such apostasy happened, of course, in the apostolic church, but, so far as we know, church discipline was not practiced in such cases. Church discipline seems only to be for people who want to continue to be known as Christians. If excommunication is the acknowledgment that the church no longer considers a person a Christian, what does it mean in the case of someone who has already declared that he doesn't consider himself a Christian any longer? In our experience here we have typically written letters to such former church members simply acknowledging their apostasy and paid them the respect due their own decision, grievous as it is to us.

I raise these issues – and could raise more – simply to alert you to the fact that while the way forward, however painful, is sometimes clear and straightforward, it often is not and elders, who know more than the congregation does in most cases, are put on their mettle to make judgments that sometimes require the wisdom of Solomon himself and judgments that, for a variety of reasons, can be difficult to explain to the congregation to the extent that the congregation should know anything about what has transpired. We have imposed church discipline through the years for sexual misbehavior, for the abandonment of one's marriage and children, for financial malfeasance, for physical abuse, and so on, but other members who did similar things were not censured, either because the repentance was immediately forthcoming or because the situation itself proved to be different in various ways. Such is the challenge of church discipline. The congregation rarely knows as much as the elders do and since we will never publish the details of the sins of our members, the congregation must trust the elders to have made appropriate judgments.

We intend to practice church discipline because we are commanded to do so in the Word of God. We intend to hold the congregation to the standard of God's law and to make sure that everyone understands that no one can persuasively profess faith in Jesus Christ who does not honor him as the Lord and Master of his or her life. We are perfectly willing to require difficult things of

God's people and to forbid them to take the easy way out, the world's way, if in fact the difficult thing is what is commanded in the Word of God. But, at the same time, we are committed to make sure that our judgments are strictly in keeping with the Word of God, that they can be justified by the plain-speaking of the Bible, and that any serious, thoughtful Christian who knew the facts as well as the elders did, would have little difficulty understanding why our judgment was what it was.

What that means, in practice, is that the censure of the church will not be imposed unless it is absolutely necessary; that it will be imposed only after every possible effort has been made to recall the church member to obedience; only after the biblical data have been thoroughly explored and explained to the party in question; and only after the elders are convinced that they have all the facts, or, at least, have the facts to the extent that it is possible to have them.

All of this, of course, is predicated on the assumption that the practice of church discipline is in fact the practice of love; love for the offending brother or sister and love for the church as a whole. This is why, at the outset, I read not only vv. 15-20 of Matthew chapter 18, but vv. 10-14 as well. The practice of church discipline can only be practiced rightly by those who understand what the Lord is really talking about here and why. *He is talking about helping his little ones.* He is talking about recovering one of his followers who has gone astray, like the one sheep in the flock of 100. The parable of the lost sheep establishes the context of the Lord's remarks about dealing with sin in the life of Christians. He is not a lawyer here, laying down procedures to ensure that everyone gets the same treatment. He is a shepherd making sure that his sheep learn to care for one another like he cares for them. Sheep go astray. Any shepherd knows that and any church soon learns that. What is the best way to find them and bring them back to safety? *That is the Lord's concern here.* And the best way is the gentlest way, the least embarrassing way, the least public way, the way most considerate of a person's feelings, of his reputation; the way that makes it easiest for a Christian who has stumbled to get back on his feet.

That is why private conference is the Lord's first recommendation. Often the offender can be helped back on his feet by a single conversation with a Christian brother or sister and no one else need know of the stumble. There is a world of sinning, sinning that is known to someone else but only he or she; and no one else ever needs to know. It is an extraordinary gift of God when our sins are known only to a loving brother or sister who helps us turn away from them. If you remember, St. Patrick committed some sin as a teenager, whatever it was? We don't know what it was. It was serious enough that Patrick's tortured conscience finally demanded that he confess it to a close Christian friend. And that sin remained a secret until, near the end of Patrick's life, it was disclosed by his erstwhile friend to the church authorities who were out to get the great Irish bishop. That was a terrible thing that false friend did. We read in Proverbs 19:11:

“A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense.”

Publishing the sins of a repentant brother is a deeply unchristian act, the act of man who does not appreciate how many of his own sins Christ has covered. Or, better, the act of a man who forgets how many of his own sins God might have chosen to expose to others. As John Newton, the author of *Amazing Grace* once wrote in a letter:

“The Lord makes some of his children examples and warnings, as he pleases. They who are spared and whose worst deviations are known only to the Lord and themselves, have great reason to be thankful. I am sure I have: the merciful Lord has not suffered me to make any considerable blot in my profession during the time I have been numbered amongst his people. But I have nothing to boast of herein. It has not been owing to my wisdom, watchfulness, or spirituality.... I hope to go softly all my days under the remembrance of many things, for which I have as great cause to be abased before him, as if I had been left to sin grievously in the sight of men.” [“Grace in the Ear,” *Cardiphonia*, pb ed.]

In other words, Newton is admitting that he had done things as a Christian that, had they become known to others, would have been the sort of thing that would have damaged his reputation and, perhaps changed his life. If God had chosen to reveal to others some of his sins, people would have had a very different view of the pastor of Olney and later of St. Mary’s Woolnoth in London. This is the humble admission of many a Christian. And, when we add our omissions to the number of such sins – our failures to be and do what Christians should be and do; well, who are we to expose others to public humiliation? We should never, unless, only unless our brother refuses to accept that he has done wrong and refuses to ask for forgiveness. In other words, our first interest is to cover the sin and get the Christian back on his or her feet as easily as possible. We are not interested in punishment; that is the Lord’s business, not ours. Clearly the Lord does not want our sins to be known any more widely than absolutely necessary. He knew how hard it was to live down our sins when they become public knowledge. If only one brother knows, and the sin is repented of, that is best. If only a few brothers know and the sin is repented of, that is still much better. But, one way or another, the sin must be repented of if the sheep is actually a sheep.

On the other hand, there comes a time when all possible efforts have been exhausted. Sometimes sheep don’t want to come back and will not. Then attention must turn to the welfare of the rest of the flock. Sheep wandering off in every which way must never become the normal expectation of flock. They must be made to see that safety lies in obedience to the shepherd and nearness to one another. That is precisely what parents do for their children when they discipline them. They instill in them a commitment to obedience which, for children and for adults, is the only safe way to live; they only way to true and lasting happiness.

The great difference between Christians and non-Christians in this world is not that non-Christians sin against God and man and Christians do not. Christians remain sinners. The Bible is brutally frank about that fact. What distinguishes the believer from the unbeliever is not that one sins and the other does not, but that the Christian *sorrows for* his sins and repents of them. The Christian admits his fault and is eager to repudiate it and to put on new obedience for Christ’s sake. But sometimes, only rarely but sometimes, a Christian is slow to admit his fault and slow to repent of it. Even when confronted he defends himself instead of acknowledging his wrong. Then, and only then, church discipline is brought to bear to help him do what he should do and what, if he is a Christian, he wants to do. And, if he proves at last not to want to live as a Christian, then both he and the church are helped by clarifying his status.

In our sad world such things are necessary and in the church what is necessary is what ought to be done. We intend to remain a congregation that does the necessary thing, but does it in the spirit and in the way in which we are taught to do it in the Word of God.