

“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his sin just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have regained your brother. ¹⁶But if he will not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ ¹⁷If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And, if he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as an unbeliever or a tax collector. ¹⁸Amen I tell you: Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Amen I tell you again: If two of you on earth agree to ask for anything, it will be done for them by my Father who is in heaven. ²⁰In fact where two or three have gathered together in my name, there I am among them.” (EHV)

Theme: Love For the Sinner

1. We admonish in love
2. We forgive in love

“Spare the rod, spoil the child” is a well-known saying. While it’s not from the Bible—it was actually written by Samuel Butler in a satirical poem from the 1600’s—it is biblical in meaning. In fact, that phrase is similar to many different proverbs, especially Proverbs 13:24, **A person who withholds his rod hates his son, but one who loves him administers discipline promptly.** If you have ever been a parent, you know how important it is to address sinful actions of your children promptly, and apply the appropriate discipline when necessary. The same can be said about Church discipline. It is good and proper for the Church and the individual members of the Church to admonish, and perhaps discipline, a fellow believer when he falls into sin. Not only is it good and proper, but God actually commands us to do it; and he gives us a blueprint to follow.

We call them the steps of Church discipline. And the first step is, **go and show him his sin just between the two of you.** First, we notice that we are to go. Not wait to see how things play out, not ignore the situation, not let someone “sow their wild oats.” But go to him and talk to him. What are you to talk about? You are to point out his sin to him; show him that what he did or said was contrary to God’s Word. And you are to do this just between the two of you. That is key—no gossiping about it with others, no complaining about what was done; and no need at this point to get others involved. Instead, privately you go and speak to the sinner yourself. If he doesn’t listen to you, then the next step is to take others along with you as witnesses. The sinner may not listen to you, but he may listen to some of his friends or relatives, or a well-respected Christian. Plus, there is strength in numbers—two or three people may be able to better persuade an unrepentant sinner of the error of his ways. More people puts more weight as to the seriousness of his actions. And if the sinner still refuses to listen, then you take it to the Church—you tell the elders, the Pastors; and may be brought to the attention of the Voters. When the Church gets involved matters have become more serious. The seriousness of the wicked actions are clearly laid out and the implications of his lack of remorse are made known. And if he refuses to listen even to the Church, then the fourth and final step of Church discipline is carried out, **treat him as an unbeliever or a tax collector.** This is known as excommunication. Jews were not to associate with unbelievers. Tax collectors were seen as cheats and traitors; they weren’t allowed in the temple and were hated by almost everyone. To treat someone as an unbeliever or a tax collector, then, means to have no religious fellowship with him, which in turn may affect the social relationship between the two. This last and final

step isn't taken lightly, but one made after much work and prayer; and only taken as a last resort. And this final step is more than "kicking someone out of the Church," it is a declaration that by the sinful actions of someone and his refusal to repent, despite repeated admonitions to do so, he has declared himself to be an unbeliever and outside the Church of God. Again, this is not something that any Christian should be taking lightly.

Those are the steps of Church discipline. Notice that they start with that command from Jesus to go. Go. Make the effort to go and talk to the sinner yourself. But that's hard to do, and something that we often fail to do. And we offer other excuses as to why we can't go: 1. That's the Church's job—that's why we have pastors and a board of elders, so they can do this for me. Or, 2. That sin isn't that big of a deal, many others have done it. Or, 3. That sin doesn't affect me, so why should I care? It's between him and God. Or, 4. I'm such a sinner, who am I to go and point out the wicked actions of others?

There are probably more excuses that you've come up with yourself. But here's the truth. The Lord commands you—not just the Church (which isn't to get involved until the third step), but you as a believer, to address a sin with a fellow believer who is unrepentant. It is your business because God has made it your business. It is a big deal because, **the soul who sins is the one who will die**, as the Lord says in Ezekiel 18. If it was a big enough deal for Jesus to suffer and die for it on the cross, then it needs to be addressed! And here's the bottom line, as we see as we look at Ezekiel in our first lesson: If we don't go and show someone his sin and he dies in unbelief, then his eternal damnation is on us because we failed to warn him like we should have.

And so we go. It might be painful, it might not go well, they might hate us for pointing out their sin. They could attack us, calling us self-righteous hypocrites, and so on. And yet we go. Why? Because we love them, and we care about them. We know that any unrepentant sin put one's soul in danger as it could lead to eternal damnation. And like Christ, we want, **all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth**. We don't want anyone to perish for eternity, but we want them to repent and live—live with us and the Lord forever in heaven. That is our goal, that is what this is all about. So we put aside any feelings of animosity, any possible misgivings we may have, and go to the sinner in love.

The whole goal, as Jesus put it, is that the sinner may listen to you. And if he does—if he listens to your call to repent, and he has that contrition—a guilt and remorse over his sin, then you have won him over. And you can comfort him with the sweet message of the gospel! Because the truth is that Jesus has already paid for each and everyone of our sins, by his sacrifice on the cross. No matter what someone does and no matter how many times sins are committed—each and every one of our sins were paid for by Christ as he shed his innocent blood. Through him we are freely and fully forgiven, by no work of our own, but by a gracious gift of his love. And sharing this message of forgiveness is what the keys are all about! They are the power and right that God has given to his church to bind the sins of the impenitent and to forgive the sins of those repent. You have the binding key, or the law, which refuses to forgive the sins of those who do not repent. And there is the loosing key, or the gospel, which releases repentant sinners from the guilt and condemnation of their sins. And the loosing key, the gospel, the message of free and full forgiveness in Christ, is what the keys are all about. The goal of the keys is to use the loosing key, the goal is to save the sinful soul. James mentions this in the final words of his letter, **the one who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins**

And then that affects the way we go about using the keys, the way we go about carrying out church discipline. It's done all in a spirit of love. We don't go to a sinner to make him feel bad, or to make ourselves feel good in comparison, we go to save his life since we are concerned about the sinner's soul. And if that is our main concern when using the keys, then we know that

each step of Church discipline can be carried out multiple time! It's not as if it's a "three strikes and you're done" situation. No, we might go to the person again and again ourselves; on multiple occasions we might take two or three others along with us. The Church may work with the sinner for months on end. Because the steps of Church discipline aren't an end in themselves, they are means to the end of leading someone to repentance. And so if we really do care about someone and want them to live forever, we will work with them as much as possible so that he would see the error of his ways, repent, and live!

Even the final step of excommunication is an act of love. Some try to label it as unloving, some question how a Christian congregation could do such a thing. But it's one last act of desperation, one final "kick in the pants" with the hope and prayer that this act of excommunication will be a spiritual wake-up call for the unrepentant sinner that he has declared himself to be an unbeliever and is on his way to hell. If we love someone and care about their spiritual well-being, then the loving thing to do is to warn him if he is on his way to eternal damnation. Paul mentions the goal of excommunication in 1 Corinthians 5, **hand such a man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that the spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord Jesus.**

There is another important step we often forget when carrying out these steps—prayer. That is what Jesus is talking about in verse 19. When we are working with someone who is caught in sin, we must not forget this important step. We pray that the Lord would lead him to repentance through the keys—that he would live forever in heaven with us. And the Lord promises to answer that prayer as we share the law and gospel with him.

And we have another promise from the Lord—it's to be with us, **where two or three have gathered together in my name, there I am among them.** We are used to this verse being applied to worship services or Bible Studies. And it certainly can apply to those things, but in context this is talking about Church discipline. When we go to someone and show him his sin; when we use the keys—the binding and loosing key according to God's Word (not our own personal feelings or beliefs), God promises to be with us and back us up. And so the keys that we use stand for both here on earth and in heaven!

"Spare the rod, spoil the child." If you love your children, you discipline them in some way. In the same way, if you love your fellow believers, you will go to them when they are caught in a sin. We love just as Christ loved us, and so we go to them with the keys—the law and the gospel and pray that they might repent; and when we do we loose them from their sins, telling them of the forgiveness that is theirs in Christ so that they will believe and join us in heaven! That is the goal as we use the keys—and in everything we do. Amen.