

GSM 6/10/13

Church discipline

Matthew 18:15-22

1 Timothy 5:17-21

I'd like to tell you about something that happened about 7 or 8 years ago to my daughter Rebecca. Jo, Jonny, Becca and I were walking home along Approach Road. Jonny was about 5 and Rebecca about 2. We were doing that thing that you do with young children, where one adult holds each hand and goes "1, 2, 3 ..." and then swings the child up in the air. Each of them had had lots of turns and it was Jonny's turn, but Becca still wanted a turn so I thought I could swing her on my own. I was on Jonny's right hand side, Jo on the left, and Becca was holding my right hand. At the same time as I swung Jonny up in the air with my left hand, I did the same with Becca with my right, but she yelped with pain. It quickly became clear that something was wrong which needed a trip to Casualty, so Jo and Becca went off, Becca clutching her left arm and crying, whilst I stayed home with Jonny. When they got to hospital they had to wait, as you do. Jo used to work as a physio and thought that I had dislocated Becca's elbow. She put a piece of chocolate in Becca's left hand and said she could eat it but only if she could bring it up to her mouth with her left hand. Becca really tried but was unable to do so. Jo was right – I had dislocated her elbow and it needed someone to slot it back into place. Once the medical staff realised what had happened they found a doctor to do it. He hadn't done it many times before and was quite nervous, but managed to push the elbow back into the right place. Becca screamed as he did it – it was momentarily very painful - but then once it was back in place was immediately able to use her arm again and got to eat the rest of the chocolate. She was fully restored.

Sin has the power to disrupt and dislocate parts of the body. We all know this. If you are angry with your Christian brother and sister, if you are lustful, if you are proud, then it affects your relationship with that Christian brother or sister, and not in a good way. Sin disrupts and dislocates. Now, I always define the word "sin" when I talk about it – sin is the term used by the Bible to mean acting in rebellion to God. It says in Romans 14 that anything that

does not come from faith is sin – anything where we decide to go our own way and not instead follow Jesus. The result of sin can be that part of the body is dislocated. The body as a whole suffers, and a remedy is needed.

Part of that remedy is to be found in church discipline. Now, “discipline” is a very loaded term and means different things to different people. The two passages we are looking at today give us two examples of what it looks like in practice, but for the most part what I want to unpack this morning are the reasons for church discipline, so we understand why the Bible tells us to do things which may appear harsh, dictatorial or judgmental.

Let’s look at the passage in Matthew 18. It shows us the primary purpose of church discipline. The primary purpose of church discipline is to restore believers who are going astray and to reconcile them with their Christian brothers and sisters. Just as Becca’s elbow needed to be put back into place, the main purpose of church discipline is to restore us to our rightful place. Now, of course, we all sin – we all do things that rebel against God and his instructions. The normal way for a Christian to deal with sin does not involve the steps set out in this Matthew 18 passage but other steps. Bear with me, because this is important. The first step in dealing with sin is **conviction** of sin. This is where the Holy Spirit says to you “Hold on a sec, that thing you did, that’s not right”. So, I get angry with my friend and snap at him. The Holy Spirit says “Simon, that was not a response of love but one of anger. That was wrong”. The next step is **confession** – not to a priest, but to myself or others and God. I have to accept that it was wrong. Sometimes this is a struggle – “yes, but he was doing that thing that really winds me up and I’m tired”. We need to get to the point of “Yes, that was wrong.” The next step is **repentance**. I must deal with my anger and selfishness that caused me to lash out at my friend and resolve to react differently next time. The next step is **restitution** – I need as far as I can to address the consequences of my action and restore my relationship with my friend. My anger has damaged my relationship with my friend. I need to find a way of showing him that I am still committed to him as a brother and a friend. I need in that case to apologise and assure him of my commitment to him, and show my commitment by my actions. The final step is **reconciliation**. My friend forgives me and our relationship is restored.

Church discipline is needed when that process doesn’t work as it should. If I refuse to acknowledge my wrong or repent of it then I need help to do so, because otherwise my

relationship with my friend will continue to be affected by my outburst. Now that doesn't mean that my friend rushes off straight away to have me thrown out of church – instead he approaches me to say “that thing you did, that wasn't right”. That is church discipline – someone approaching someone else to alert them to their sin. I've had it happen to me many times when I did something and had been blind to my sin and someone – my family, friends and members of this church – has come up to me and said “Simon, you've been an arse and you need to stop”. Didn't feel like church discipline at the time – felt like my friends caring for me and preventing me from doing any more damage. If I don't listen, then the steps increase so that others get involved, and eventually I may be asked to spend time away from the fellowship. But look at Matthew 18 – the purpose is restoration. Do you see how the passage has the church discipline steps right next to a bit on unity? God wants us to be unified and look at verses 19 and 20 – he promises that where we are united in prayer, he will answer us and he promises that when we come together in his name, he is present. That's the goal. Reconciliation and restoration is what this is about. The church is not a company which is always looking for opportunities to get rid of staff – the church is a body and a family. When one bit hurts, we all hurt. The aim is restoration. This may involve pain and distress, in the same way that Becca suffered pain in having her elbow manipulated back into position. But the outcome is restoration of the body part that is out of kilter and recovery of function for the body.

Before we move on, let's note that the teaching on church discipline in Matthew 18 is also next to a passage on forgiveness. If I am angry with my friend, and seek to restore my relationship with him, reconciliation will only occur if he is prepared to forgive me. That forgiveness can be costly, if someone has done something that has hurt you. But that is the responsibility of those affected by the sin – to reconcile with the person who has hurt them and forgive them. Jesus says in verse 22 that we should forgive them “seventy seven times”. That does not mean that at the 78th time we can stop forgiving – it means that there should be no limit to our forgiveness. We need to forgive over and over again. We do so because God sees Jesus on the cross paying the price for our sins and forgives us, over and over again. Is forgiveness costly for us? It was more costly for God.

The first and most important purpose of church discipline is to restore the believer who has strayed. But it's not the only purpose of church discipline. Let me illustrate the second purpose of church discipline this way. Now and then I take the kids to the sports shop

Decathlon in Surrey Quays to buy new shuttlecocks, squash equipment, waterproofs or whatever. The shop is huge - two huge warehouses full of sports equipment. One of the warehouses has various exercise machines – treadmills, rowing machines, cross trainers and exercise bikes. One time we were there and a number of other children were having a go on the machines, which were all switched on. There was nothing indicating that you couldn't try them out. The kids asked to have a go and I said “well, I guess so”. After a while a member of staff came along quite cross and told all the children to get off the exercise equipment in no uncertain terms. I didn't appreciate someone telling my children off for something they hadn't done wrong and I said to him “if you don't want the kids to try out the equipment then maybe you should make it clearer that they're not allowed to do so.” My children had seen lots of other kids trying out the equipment and had, not unreasonably, assumed it was OK for them to do so.

The second purpose of church discipline is to prevent sin from spreading in the church body – seeing someone do something and assume it is OK for us to do so as well. This is where we turn to 1 Timothy 5, and what happens if an elder is continually sinning. By the way, our leaders in this church combine the Biblical roles of “elder” and “deacon”, so this passage applies to them. What this passage shows us is the importance of elders in the church. Verse 17 says that elders are worthy of honour. Verse 18 likens their work to the backbreaking work undertaken by oxen. In Hebrews 13 we are called to obey our leaders, to consider the outcome of their way of life and to imitate their faith. We are to honour them, obey them, watch them and imitate them. So, Paul writes to Timothy, it is especially important for an elder to be dealing with their sin as they represent role models for the rest of us. Of course, elders like the rest of us sin and need to repent continually, but the key difference between the leaders of the church and those of us who are not leaders is that the leaders have the extra responsibility of acting as people whose faith we are instructed to imitate. If they repent of their sin and there is restoration and reconciliation then that is a good model for the rest of us to follow. But if they continue to sin and refuse to repent then that is not a good model for the rest of us to follow. There is a risk that the rest of us might see their behaviour and think “oh, so that's alright then” and adjust our views as to what's acceptable and not. I would not have agreed to my children having a go on the equipment in Decathlon if I had not seen others try out the machines with no-one seeming to mind. So when a leader, who we are to imitate, continually sins and refuses to repent, Paul instructs Timothy that they should be reprimanded publically. Why? Verse 20: “so that the others may take warning”. The other

elders may take warning that this is the standard to which they will be held. The church members may take warning that the church does not approve of or tolerate persistent sin, and that this behaviour of the elder in question should not be imitated.

Do we, I wonder, consider the weighty responsibility that this loads on our leaders? Do we honour them as a church? Do we obey them and imitate them as we should? I feel we could do better. You may feel now and then that that is not what you want to do, but isn't that why the Bible instructs us to do things – because it knows that we will be tempted not to do them?

Notice also that here Paul cuts off any get-out clause for Timothy in taking this step of reprimanding elders publicly. Doubtless Timothy knew many of the elders in the churches he was responsible for and must have felt tempted to make an exception on this case or that case for various reasons. Look at verse 21 – “I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality and without favouritism”. Paul writes lots of instructions in his letters, but I have never read him saying “I charge you in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels” in relation to any other instruction. The public reprimand of a leader is always painful and especially painful given that elders are friends as well as leaders and will be honoured by those they serve. But there's no get out of jail free card here for those who are instructed to do the discipline.

I want to mention the final purpose of church discipline even though it's not directly referred to in these passages. It is to preserve the honour of God's name.

When I was at university one of my friends was a Malaysian chap called Aznul who became in his third year the president of the University Islamic Society. When he left the college at the end of his third year he left a statement of his beliefs as a Muslim in the pigeon holes of several people. In it he said that he had identified England as being a Christian country but the behaviour of those in the college brought shame to the name of Christianity. People would sleep around, gossip and backbite and pay no attention to the demands of the Bible. The one exception, he said, was the college Christian Union, who did not sleep with their girlfriends or boyfriends, who worked hard, who did their best to live out the teachings of the Christian faith. Aznul identified the Christian faith with the whole country of England, and was disgusted by what he saw. When he saw how the CU behaved, though, he said he saw an authentic Christianity. I remember reflecting on that and the sort of thing that would go on in

the CU. Of course we went off the rails now and then but one of the leaders when he saw people doing things that were out of kilter with God's word would very gently tell them that they needed to repent. The leader who would do this was a humble man, a man of laughter and of peace who lived out what he believed and none of us minded his reproach – and I'm sure that he did us a service in reproaching us. He also brought glory to Jesus in the eyes of our Muslim friend.

In Romans 2 Paul writes as follows to the church in Rome: "You, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who brag about the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law? As it is written "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you"". God calls his church to be holy, to reflect his holiness and purity, but instead the church in Rome were preaching one thing and doing another. That brought shame to God.

We are in the midst of a hostile and inquisitive world. The world will be quick to challenge our beliefs and will only accept what we say as true if it is borne out by our actions and lives. By God's grace and the hard work of the staff and volunteers here we can speak of a God of love and show how the clubs have loved young people, how the work with the marginalised in our society has shown love, and so forth. That brings glory to God's name – the world can see that God is love because they experience love from those who identify themselves as being God's people. But the message is compromised if they also see persistent sin in the congregation. If, for instance, we had people in our midst who were known to be sleeping with people other than their spouses then, unless we dealt with it, the name of God would be dishonoured because it would communicate to the outside world that it didn't matter. What sort of message would that give about God's holiness? In that example we would be required by Scripture to confront those who were sleeping around, instruct them as to the need for being faithful to your spouse and tell them to stop. To restore them and reconcile with their spouses, yes, to avoid creating the impression to others in the church that God doesn't care about sexual purity, yes, and also to show those outside the church what God requires of his people, and bring glory to his name. The world is watching. When they see us, to what extent do they see God's church as holy, dancing to a different rhythm from the world around, and to what extent do they see a bunch of people who are no different in their actions and attitudes from the world around them?

I want to end on a bit of a tangent by reflecting on what I think is one of the most moving encounters in Scripture. When Jesus was resurrected he spoke with Peter. Now Peter had denied Jesus three times during his trial, and had wept bitterly at his sin but was not yet reconciled with Jesus as they hadn't spoken privately since Jesus's resurrection. Jesus takes him aside and asks him three times "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter says "Lord you know I love you". Jesus says "feed my sheep". Jesus does not just reconcile with Peter. He puts Peter in charge of his flock, of those who follow Jesus. Peter's denial is not a cause for shame that hangs over Peter. Jesus turns it around. His three time denial becomes a three time placing of trust in Peter to lead his church. Jesus and Peter were fully reconciled personally but **here's the power of the gospel** – once Peter was restored and reconciled he was given even more direct authority than before. Having experienced God's grace Peter was all the more able to tell others about it and model it himself. The other disciples might have felt that Peter's ability to lead the church had been affected by his denial. Jesus said yes, you're right, it has been affected. It has made him a more effective leader.

God longs to restore, to reconcile and to equip. Despite our fumbblings and stumblings God will build us into the church against whom the gates of hell will not prevail.