

# Church Discipline: Lesson One

## *What Is Discipline?*

By Benjamin J. Williams

Thayer defines the word translated discipline (*παιδεύω*) as “to train children ... to chastise or castigate with words, to correct”. This definition only helps a little because so many do not understand how to train children. However, it should be clear that in the training of children, behavior is corrected with progressively more severe actions. First, a warning may be given for an honest mistake. When that fails, maybe warnings or the Father and Mother may both join in the admonition. When that fails, then the child is chastised with some punishment to correct the situation. However, this isn't a pattern for all discipline in the home. If a child was about to set the house on fire, discipline would not begin with calm warnings, but with sharp reprimands. These examples are very similar to what the church is expected to do with its discipline.

## ***Common Misconceptions***

Many misconceptions about discipline keep it from being properly practiced. For instance, many hear the term “church discipline” and think only of withdrawing from people left and right. The Bible does speak of withdrawal of fellowship. However, it is not a first step, but usually the last. Discipline, like in the home, begins with warnings and admonitions to do right.

Others think that there is a one size fits all pattern for all discipline. However, the Bible clearly explains very detailed categories of discipline that are tailored to fit every situation. For person transgression, we have the gentle process of Matt. 18. For public transgression, we have the more open process of I Cor. 5. For disorderly conduct, we have the rules of II The. 3. All of these are to be handled with gentle, but firm action. “And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, [25] In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; [26] And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will” (II Tim. 2:24). “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. [2] Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:1-2). However for a false teacher, we are sharp to protect the household of God. “For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: [11] Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake. ... [13] This witness is true. Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith; [14] Not giving heed to Jewish fables, and commandments of men, that turn from the truth” (Tit. 1:10-14).

Some don't understand what withdrawal of fellowship is. Many think it is an announcement or a letter making a statement. However, withdrawal of fellowship is a cessation of some kind of action. We never stop loving the person, but we do not treat the person as a fellow laborer in Christ. They are treated as “heathens and publicans”.

We are not to eat with such a one. We are not to bid them “Godspeed” or good luck in their sin. This is not out of meanness but to cause the person shame. It is to let them know that we do not approve of their sin. This is to cause them to repent and rejoin our fellowship.

The withdrawal of fellowship does not end family relationships. A father is still a father and a son is still a son. A wife is still a wife and a husband is still a husband. All God given, family duties must still be met. A father must continue to provide for a child that has been withdrawn from. A husband must still cherish a wife that has been withdrawn from. A wife must still submit to a husband that has been withdrawn from, so long as she is not asked to sin. However, it will introduce a severe and appropriate strain on these relationships. Unnecessary social activities will cease. Maybe you used to go out to eat all the time. Now you don’t. Something has to change in that relationship that will say to the withdrawn person, “I am still your husband/wife/father/son but I don’t approve of your sin.” What specifically is to change to make that point is not specifically stated in the Bible, so we are left to use our judgment to fulfill this broad command.

## ***Common Excuses***

There are at least as many excuses as misunderstandings when it comes to fellowship and discipline. Some view discipline as a mean spirited act. If discipline is done with a mean spirit, it is sinful, just as it would be for a father to gleefully punish his children. However, that does not mean that there is anything “mean” about discipline. God commands it. Is God a “big meany”?

Some will say that they have tried it in the past only to suffer a terrible failure. First, we should remember that failure is measured differently by God than by us. If we did what is right in the right way, God will never view that as failure. Second, we should remember that some situations we view as failure are in fact the cause of not doing God’s will in the way that he said to do it. If we don’t practice discipline the way God said to do it, of course it may fail! Third, we must remember that our personal experiences and history are quite irrelevant to this discussion. We must do God’s will whether we think it works or not.

Some will say that discipline is a hard doctrine, too hard to be practiced. Do we even know what “hard” is? Suffering slander and illegal trials at the hands of those you love – that would be hard. Being beaten with a scourge that ripped the flesh from your bones – that would be hard. Bearing a corn of thorns that pierced your brow – that would be hard. Being nailed to a cross – that would be hard. Hanging between heaven and earth until your inevitable death – that would be hard. Bleeding and dying for the people that were calling for your death – that would be hard. Asking the Father to forgive them – that would be hard. I don’t think we have any right to talk about what is too hard for us to do.

However, I must admit that practicing discipline, especially with relatives or close friends, will seem very hard in an emotional way. We must suffer this mild discomfort as Christ suffered his immense pain. We must remember that we are doing what is best for them, no matter how much it hurts us and no matter how they may abuse us for it. God’s will is best for everyone.

## ***Guiding Principles of Discipline***

The Bible offers several principles that will guide our further study of this subject. First, in all that we do, we must serve and love God (Matt. 22:36-40; Col. 3:17). Whatever else may come up, whatever problems may arise, we must love God. To love God, we must keep his commandments (John 14:15; 15:10).

Second, we must love our fellow man (Matt. 22:36-40). In some cases, we will show our love for our fellow man by helping him overcome his sin. In some cases, we will show our love for our fellow man by doing what is necessary to protect the purity of the church that it be not defiled.

Third, “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt. 7:12). When in doubt about how to treat a person, we can always turn to this simple rule. However, it should be remembered that this rule can only be applied on the eternal scale. The question should be, “How would I want to be approached so that I may repent?”, not “How would I want to be approached so that I could save face?”

Fourth, we must always be meek. We must never lose control of ourselves. “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted” (Gal. 6:1). If we lose our temper, we make a situation worse and possible cause a soul to be lost.

Finally, when the person repents, we must be ready to forgive. “Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many. [7] So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow” (II Cor. 2:6-7). After all, isn’t this the main purpose of discipline – to help others fix their lives?

## ***Disclaimers***

At this point I want to offer two warnings. First, please take note that I will be using example stories to illustrate proper and improper discipline. Some will be real stories taken from the experience of preachers I know. I hope to take none from any experiences of yours. I will also be making up some typical stories. If my typical story sounds like a real story you were involved in, don’t assume I am preaching at you. Some stories are just common. For example, a man or woman taken in fornication is a story found in the Bible and played out in congregations everywhere, so take these stories as they are – just illustrations. I am not writing these articles to “get” anybody or embarrass anybody. I writing these articles so that we no how to conduct ourselves when these situations arise ... and they will arise. They always do.

Second, I want to caution you to leave your preconceptions at the door for the next five lessons. Some of you may think that I can’t preach about discipline without being negative and mean. I believe that discipline is a positive doctrine. I think it is God telling us, “When you make a mistake, it can be fixed, and here’s how!” Some of you may think that these will be far out, theoretical lessons. I believe that discipline is a practical, simple doctrine. Want to know what to do when a Christian sins against you? That’s lesson two. Want to know what to do when a Christian sins publicly and

embarrasses the church? That's lesson three. Want to know what to do when some has a problem in their life that just drags on and on? That's lesson four. Want to know what to do when somebody in the congregation starts to hurt it through actions or words? That's lesson five and six. These are important practical lessons about real life situations.

You have a choice to make. You can ignore these lessons and this subject. You can meet at your church building and "play church" like children. Or you can take your home congregation very seriously. You can say, let's do this right. Let's change our community and the world. Let's save the lost. Let's live right ourselves. Let's do things God's way. Discipline is the key to doing that. Until we practice discipline, we are just playing church and waiting for disaster. The world needs a strong church that is ready to stand the test of time and face all problems with God's will in our hands and in our hearts. Discipline will make us strong.