



GATHERED

The Empowered Presence of God's People

TEACHER NOTES & DISCUSSION GUIDE

SESSION SEVEN: The Safeguard of the Church

A Study on the Church by



SMYRNAFIRST
BAPTIST CHURCH



Session Seven

The Safeguard of the Church

Introduction

Few images of our Savior are more comforting than the picture of him as our good shepherd. It is actually one of his favorite metaphors for his relationship to his church. When we hear him speak of laying his life down for his sheep, we are reminded of his immense love for us on the cross of Calvary. When we hear him say that he knows each of us by name, it reminds us that we are individually precious to him and that we are more than just a corporate mass of humanity. When he invokes images of protector, we are reassured that whatever evils may seek to destroy us, we have a shepherd who is able to fight our battles, but not only that, he is also *willing* to do it. Such comfort!

Jesus tells the story of a shepherd who has a flock of 100 sheep. Upon finding that one of his flock has become lost, he leaves the 99 and goes in search of the one in mortal danger. When he finds this sheep, he rejoices with his neighbors and tells everyone of the sheep that has been found and there is great rejoicing over it.

We often tell this story to illustrate how much joy there is in heaven when one lost sinner is found. That is correct. But take another look at the context of this story in Matthew 18. Jesus is speaking of those already in his flock who sin and because of it are put in mortal danger (which is the meaning of the word *lost* in the parable). Jesus leaves the 99 who are *not* in any mortal danger and goes in search of the one who is, bringing that precious sheep back into the fold. It is instructive to note the other sayings of Jesus that immediately surround this parable.

At the beginning of the chapter, the disciples are asking Jesus to tell them who will be the greatest in the kingdom. Jesus answers by illustrating the trust and tenderness of a child, even warning the disciples that if anyone were to cause this child to stumble there are severe penalties. He goes on to discuss the nature of temptation and again warns that we should do everything in our power to avoid sin, even plucking out or cutting off any offending members of our own bodies should they pose any obstacle to holiness. It is after this that he tells the parable of the lost sheep. Immediately after this parable in Matthew's gospel, Jesus explains the process he wants us to follow when the occasion arises to reconcile a Christian caught in sin. Right after that, he speaks on forgiveness and reconciliation.

You see it, don't you? Jesus loves his sheep so much that he will stop at nothing to have them at his side. If we are his, he will search the wilds for us and bring us safely back into the fold so that we are not torn apart by predators or die in the elements. He will provide cover and protection and peace for his sheep. And all of heaven rejoices at the repentance of those who are straying into sin.

This is the heart of church discipline. It illustrates a posture very different than one you may have come to know in your own experience of the church. So let's spend our time this morning reacquainting ourselves with this reconciliatory and *essential* doctrine of the church.

I. What's Love Got to Do with It?

- A. The practice and doctrine of church discipline has fallen on hard times.
 - 1. Few church these days practice anything even close to church discipline and many in the church view it as a puritanical approach to sin, too strict for serious consideration in today's world.
 - 2. Our own church by-laws address in detail church discipline in Section 2.
 - a) It is so important to the function of our church that it is addressed immediately after defining membership.

- b) But how many of us would be able to adequately explain the process of church discipline, the heart of church discipline and the reason for church discipline?
 - c) How many of us could even say we have been actively involved in any case of church discipline? The answer may surprise you.
- B. To begin any discussion on church discipline, we must first establish the nature of discipline in the church.
 - 1. Love for one another is the overwhelming nature of the church.
 - a) **John 13:35** “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”
 - b) Love is, as John says here, the singular identifying characteristic of Jesus’ disciples.
 - c) This command is scattered consistently throughout the New Testament. Peter, Paul, John, and the writer of Hebrews all include it in their teaching as a central ethic of the church.¹
 - 2. But we must be careful when we speak of love in today’s culture.
 - a) Not that we must shy away from speaking about it, but that we must be careful to define what we mean by love.
- C. The modern definition of love means something very different than what Christians mean by love.
 - 1. The modern definition describes love as accepting or permissive.
 - a) The idea is that love is “unconditional”.
 - b) As Christians, we know how inconsistent the world is in holding this view of love.
 - c) What the world really means by unconditional love is permissive love or accepting without question love.
 - d) But this isn’t the biblical idea of love.
 - 2. The biblical definition of love is redemptive and nurturing.
 - a) The Bible speaks of love as something that is always active in seeking the good of someone else.
 - b) **1 John 4:7-11** “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”
 - (1) This text teaches us that the highest expression of God’s love for us is the propitiatory death of Jesus on our behalf.
 - (2) It teaches that we didn’t have love for God, but that he had love for us.
 - (3) And if God loved us in this way, then we ought to love others in the same manner.
 - (4) Therefore, love one another in seeking to bring them into righteousness by laying your life down for them.
 - (a) Biblical love is sacrificial and conciliatory; never permissive.
 - (b) Biblical love stands between someone and their bad decisions, urging them to turn away from sin and be reconciled to God.
 - (c) Along the way it is patient, kind. It does not envy or boast, not arrogant, rude, insist on its own way, irritable, resentful, or rejoice in wrong-doing.

¹ A simple survey of this concept in the NT reveals much about how we interact and respond to one another in the church. Read the other NT verses about love for one another at the following link. <https://www.biblegateway.com/quicksearch/?quicksearch=love+one+another&version=ESV>



- (d) Love rejoices in the truth. It bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things.
- (e) All this is obviously defined for us in the great love chapter of the Bible, **1 Corinthians 13:4-7**.
- (5) Biblical love reconciles by covering sin.
 - (a) **1 Peter 4:8** "Above all, keep loving **one another** earnestly, since **love** covers a multitude of sins."
- D. Therefore Biblical love calls us to actively reconcile one another to the standard of God's righteousness.
 - 1. It is both something we do and something we feel.
 - 2. It is goal-oriented: bringing one another into conformity with Jesus Christ and his commands.
 - 3. The Biblical lover cannot leave someone in a condition of sin without seeking to bring them out of that sin at great cost to themselves.
- E. So when we find that someone is in sin, we respond by becoming an agent of reconciliation.

II. Restore Such a One

- A. **Galatians 6:1** provides a working template for being an agent of reconciliation in the church.
 - 1. *"Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness."*
 - a) **Brothers** - this is written to saints.
 - (1) It is incumbent as part of the life of a saint to do the work of restoration between one another.
 - (2) This is a command of Scripture, therefore all believers should be working together to fulfill it.
 - b) **Caught in any transgression** - this is about sin.
 - (1) Restoration doesn't need to be performed between two people because they like different things or hold different preferences.
 - (2) Restoration is necessary when a believer falls into sin.
 - c) **You who are spiritual** - this is for the whole body of Christ.
 - (1) The natural man cannot discern the things of God (**1 Corinthians 2:14**).
 - (2) The spiritual man is every person who has the Spirit of God. Every believer has the power to discern the difference between righteousness and sinfulness.
 - (3) But this is a gift to you, created in you not by you, and is confirmed by the Word of God which is external to you. Don't think you're the standard.
 - d) **Restore him** - this is about bringing someone back.
 - (1) Restoration means two things:
 - (a) You have fallen from your previous standing.
 - (b) You have been brought back to that standing completely.
 - (2) There is no condemnation in Christ and there should be no shame for the restored believer.
 - e) **In a spirit of gentleness** - this is about tenderness, patience, and dying to self.
 - (1) When we pursue someone in sin, it is as a doctor pursues a sick patient.
 - (2) We do not act in spite, vengeance, or anger, but in patiently firm tenderness.
- B. God is very clear on his method for restoration in the church. So let's look at it step by step.

III. One Step at a Time

- A. **Matthew 18:15-17** “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”
- B. This process is built on the action of sin by a member of the church.
1. If your *brother sins* against you.
 - a) Sin is anything that falls short of God’s glory and is unbecoming of any member of the church.
 - b) The seriousness of sin cannot be overstated because it separates from God and is cause for eternal judgement and damnation.
 - c) Christians who persist in sin demonstrate by their lives that they do not know God (**I John 3:6**).
 - (1) Church discipline is brought upon a member of the church because of three types of sin.
 - (a) Personal sin - that which is done to an individual.
 - (b) Public sin - that which is done before others, especially the church.
 - (c) Persistent sin - that which is done habitually.
- C. **The First Step** - Personal Confrontation
1. Upon recognition of sin, one member should go directly to the offending party.
 - a) This teaches us that reconciliation and restoration begin as a private matter between two church members.
 - (1) In reality, you participate in church discipline every time you are obedient to go and confront sin directly with someone else.
 - (2) This type of church discipline happens all the time in the church and is extremely common.
 - (3) To problems exist with this step:
 - (a) We often fail to recognize this as church discipline and therefore pursue it no farther if this attempt is unsuccessful.
 - (b) We often fail to keep this step private, discussing it with many others before we are forced to confront it with the offender.
 - b) This conversation should have at least the following elements:
 - (1) It should be held privately and with as little fanfare as possible. Keep the drama down.
 - (2) It should be gentle and without anger and with absolute humility, knowing that this either has been or will be our position one day.
 - (3) It should clearly state the nature of the sin. Remember this isn’t because someone didn’t hold your preferences, this is a sin issue and as such should be clearly communicated using biblical evidence and factual claims.
 - (4) It should expect reconciliation and peace therefore the offended party must come to the table ready to forgive once repentance is gained.
 - c) The positive outcome of this step is also the positive outcome of later steps.
 - (1) If he listens, you have gained your brother.
 - (a) This is about keeping or losing a brother.
 - (b) Therefore we should treat it with sobriety and carefulness.
 - (c) Gaining a brother or sister is not only good for you, but it means life for him or her.
 2. But in the case that repentance is not gained, then we proceed to the second step.
- D. **The Second Step** - Witnesses

1. Upon completion of an earnest attempt to gain reconciliation in private, the offended party must bring one or two more church members along with them to make the appeal again.
 - a) The purpose for this meeting is to establish the facts and have someone corroborate that sin has indeed taken place.
 - (1) It is possible that the offended party is not correct and that no sin has indeed taken place.
 - (2) In this case, the offender has no cause for shame and no reason to repent.
 - (3) Having multiple people involved in this step helps to establish the truth of the offense.
 - b) The witnesses should be people of integrity who can be trusted to hold it in confidence.
 - (1) Remember that the goal is to keep the offense as private as possible while still seeking the reconciliation of the sinner.
 - (2) Witnesses should be people who you can trust to think biblically and objectively about the offense. They should have the ability to demonstrate good discernment and have a knowledge of the Scriptures.
 - c) An appeal for repentance should also be made at this step.
 - (1) The ultimate goal is to gain your brother or sister, so actively seeking reconciliation is always pursued.
 - (2) The hope is that if there are two or three people now imploring the offender to turn away from sin, that the expanded influence of others would cause them to soften and turn away from their sin.
2. But if this isn't the case, we move to the final step.

E. The Third Step - Church-wide Exposure

1. Telling it to the church is the act of bringing the offense before the entire congregation so that the sin, which has been established by witnesses, may be confronted publicly and personally by all the members of the church.
 - a) Again, by widening the circle of accountability, hopefully the offending party will see the seriousness of their sin and consider the consequences of continuing in it.
 - b) Telling it to the church should happen in an assembly, which is what the word "church" means in this text. Tell it to the assembly.
 - c) In our particular by-laws, it is to be done during a church-conference, either regular or called.
 - d) This is acceptable, but strong consideration should be given to making this a regular part of worship since that is the most common time the entire church is gathered and it is in the context of acknowledging our sin, praising God, preaching the Word, and prayer.
2. When the church hears of this sin, the following response is appropriate:
 - a) Mourn - the knowledge of sin should always be accompanied by genuine mourning.
 - b) Prayer - we should seek God that our brother or sister be turned to repentance and that we would escape similar falls to temptation.
 - c) Redemptive speech - we should speak to the offender personally in a way that shows compassion, mercy, hope, and love. We should not speak of it in gossip. Truthfully, no one outside the church should hear of this from someone within the church.
 - (1) Privacy of the offense is maintained as far as possible.
 - (2) Sometimes the offense is of a nature that it cannot be contained and that is fine. In cases where the sin is also a crime, it should be reported to the authorities immediately. Church discipline can still be pursued, but the illegal nature of the offense may push it to the public with greater speed.

- d) Two outcomes are possible in this scenario.
- (1) The first is that the sin being made public causes such shame in the heart of the believer that he or she repents and is reconciled to the church.
 - (a) In this case, a public confession and expression of repentance is necessary.
 - (b) If such repentance is made, the church should immediately forgive and restore the person to a right standing of fellowship.
 - (2) The second is that the person maintains their sin and does not repent.
 - (a) In this case, the person should be removed from membership of the church.
 - i) This is what it means to treat them as a Gentile and a tax collector.
 - ii) They no longer enjoy the privileges of church membership such as taking the Lord's Supper or having a voice in the congregation. They should not be given a platform or influence among the members and the church should be warned about spending time with them as they are now in active and open rebellion against God and therefore cannot be trusted to have the church's best interest in mind. In fact, they may be actively seeking to destroy the church by leading people into sin, which is satanic and evil.
 - iii) In such cases, the church, having once been in fellowship with this person, should not ignore them, but actively evangelize them when they see them.
 - iv) Sometimes the person may be able to continue attending church if they are open to the public acknowledgement that they are now no longer a member and will be treated as an unbeliever.

Conclusion

Jesus is the good shepherd. He loves his sheep. When we go astray, he will pursue us and bring us home. Every single believer that is pursued in such a way will be brought back into the fold. This is the heart of Jesus for his church.

Jesus acts and works through his body. Therefore, when the church agrees together on matters of church discipline, God is there in our midst. We become the hands and feet of the good shepherd, lovingly bringing our lost brothers and sisters back home.

- Since we sought by Christ, let us seek one another.
- Since we are shown compassion in our sin, let us show compassion to others in their sin.
- Since there is rejoicing in heaven over our repentance, let us rejoice in the repentance of others.

The church isn't a place of rejoicing over how good we are, the church is a place of rejoicing over how good God is and how we have turned from our sin.



Session Seven

Discussion Guide

USE AS MUCH OR AS LITTLE OF THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE AS YOU LIKE.

Introduction

Give some examples of practical ways we can imitate Jesus as the good shepherd of lost sheep.

I. What's Love Got to Do with It?

How have you experienced love in the church? Have you experienced redemptive love that sought to correct you?

Give some practical implications of 1 John 4:7-11. In what way can we demonstrate the kind of love expressed here?

How has the modern concept of unconditional love crept into the church?

II. Restore Such a One

Tell us a story about a time when you were actively involved in the restoration of a sinning brother or sister? How did you do it? What was the outcome?

Is this something you would be comfortable doing on your own or do you feel you would want a pastor to do this? Why?

What kind of sins do you think require this type of active restoration?

Let's talk about restoration and what that means for the church? How should we treat someone who has been restored? What kind of attitudes and fruits of the Spirit do you think might need to be shown from the church toward the restored person?

III. One Step at a Time

Have you ever experienced church discipline? Were you the offended party or the offender? What was the outcome?

Before this lesson, what was your opinion and perception of church discipline? Has it changed? How?

How would you handle someone in the church that was constantly looking for sin in others to point out? What would you say to someone that only talked to you about your sin, but never anything else?

What would your reaction be to someone confronting you about sin? What if you found yourself as the offending party? What are some attitudes that you think might be helpful in honoring God if such a thing happened?

Let's talk about some practical ways we could begin practicing church discipline regularly as the church.