

Biblical Guidelines For Church Discipline

The title of this study could be “Rescuing Stumbling Christians” because our study is a continuation of Jesus’ teaching about stumbling. Matthew 18:1-14, Mark 9:33-50 and Luke 9:46-50 record Jesus’ warning about causing others to stumble and consequently the need to help those who stumble. In the last study titled, “The Ninety-Nine and One,” Jesus gave a parable about a straying lamb and urged us to help a straying lamb - “a stumbling lamb.” We found that lambs stumble due to false doctrine, the sin of others, and their own spiritual immaturity. In this study, Matt. 18:15-20, we will discover that Jesus continues talking about stumbling lambs, but this time they stumble by sinning. In theology we call the process of rescuing a sinning Christian “church discipline.” Jesus has already encouraged us to leave the ninety-nine and rescue the one straying lamb. He even said that it is God’s will to do so. Church discipline is God’s idea; and when it is followed biblically, it is the best approach to rescuing a lamb that needs our help.

ELIMINATING CONFUSION. The opening verse of Matthew 18:15-20 according to the New American Standard Bible reads as follows:

If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. Matt. 18:15 (NASB)

This translation of Matthew 18:15 does not contain the phrase “against you” after the opening words “If your brother sins” because the oldest and best Greek manuscripts of Matthew do not contain the phrase.¹ A comparison of



Church Discipline – Rescuing Sinning Christians –

Luke 17:3-4 to Matthew 18:15-22 reveals that the phrase “against you” should not be included in the Matthew pas-

sage since Luke 17:3-4 is a summary of Matthew 18:15-22. It simply states that if a fellow Christian is in sin, then go and rebuke him. Luke 17:4 is a summary of the next set of verses, Matthew 18:21-22. There we are told that if someone sins “against you” then forgive him. The phrase “against you” only occurs in Luke 17:4 implying that a personal offense

occurred. Then we are encouraged to forgive - not to confront or rebuke them for the offense. That is, Matthew 18:15-18 should not be understood as license to rebuke those who personally offend us or refuse to forgive. Instead we are to lovingly forgive them

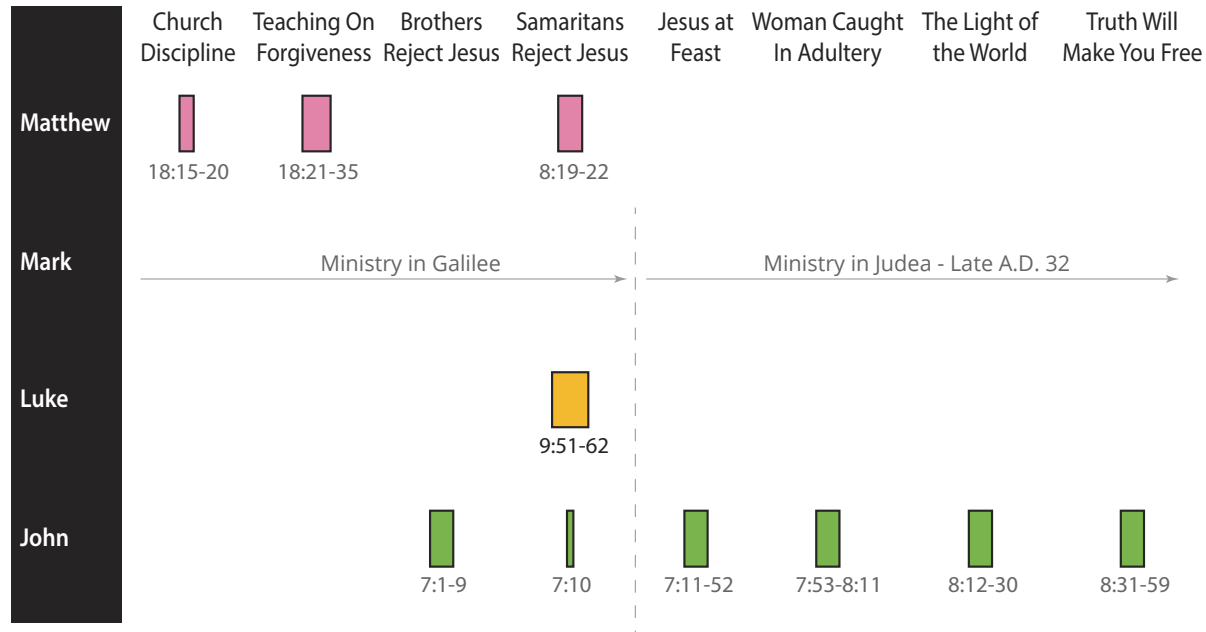
unilaterally and unconditionally. Therefore, the best reading of Matthew 18:15 should be without the phrase “against you.”

RESCUING THE STRAYING LAMB. In our last study in Matthew 18:12-14, we discovered that Christians can stum-

1. The two best manuscripts are the fourth century A.D. Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus (Reuben Swanson. New Testament Greek Manuscripts. Sheffield Academic Press. England, 1995, p. 174). This implies that “against you” was probably added by scribes in the later manuscripts. Note that the Novum Testamentum Graece, B. Aland, et al includes the phrase in brackets.

Life and Heart of Jesus

Ministry In Galilee - Late A.D. 32



ble for a variety of reasons. This study is about a Christian who stumbles due to sin. Therefore, let's assume that you discover a fellow Christian is straying by sinning. That is, they have committed some significant sin or are continuing to commit some sin. What should we do? First, we have already been taught by Jesus (Matthew 18:12-14) that we are to go and help them - not be indifferent. God the Father wants you to go and help!

Over the years, I have heard various Christians complain that church discipline is unloving and should not be practiced. They are concerned that people get hurt. They reject the process of church discipline as outlined by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-18. They say we should love everyone and not be negative, especially if the one being disciplined is a friend. Another common response is that we should ignore their sin as long as it does not hurt anyone. It is their business what they do and not ours. Such an attitude echoes the behavior of the Israelites in Judges 21:25, "Everyone did what was right in their own eyes." The only time that most Christians seem to approve of church discipline is when a Christian, married

couple pursues divorce. We rarely discipline anyone because they have taught false doctrine, committed crimes, been overtly proud, gossiped or displayed other sins. Yet Jesus told the disciples and us that if we truly care for a straying Christian, we will follow the practice of church discipline.

CHURCH DISCIPLINE - STEP 1. What is it that Jesus wants us to do to rescue sinning Christians? What is church discipline? Jesus gave us four steps that we are to follow (Matt. 18:15). The first step involves the observer going to the sinning Christian in private in order to rescue him or her.

If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. Matt. 18:15 (NASB)

They Sinned. The Greek word that is translated as sin is *ἡμαρτανον*. It is the normal word for sin (John 8:24). This is not some special sin, such as adultery. This word for sin is used in the familiar passage of Romans 3:23,

... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, Rom.

3:23 (NASB)

This reveals that Jesus is concerned for all habitual patterns of sin, not just some major sin such as divorce. But Jesus is not encouraging us to go on a witch hunt trying to find every hint and evidence of sin and stamp it out. Can you imag-

ine the damage, division, conflict and tension that would develop in a church if Christians were on a witch hunt looking for every minor sin in others? Jesus is not advocating pursuing church discipline for every sin that can be found. The effect of such an approach to church discipline would destroy churches. Instead, Jesus is concerned about flagrant

Biblical Guidelines For Helping A Sinning Christian

Sometimes Called Church Discipline

Matthew 18:15-17

Patterns of sin include:

- Immorality
 - Impurity
 - Sensuality
 - Idolatry
 - Sorcery
 - Enmities
 - Strife
 - Jealousy
 - Outbursts of anger
 - Disputes/Factions
 - Envyings
 - Drunkenness
 - Blasphemy
 - Grumblers
 - Fault Finding
 - Abusive Speech
 - Lies
 - Dissensions
- (1 Cor. 5:5; Gal. 6:19-21; 1 Tim. 1:20; Jude 6)

If person continues to sin.

- Person may not be saved (James 5:19-20)
- Person may be further disciplined by God (1 Cor. 11:30; Heb. 12:6)
- God may take person to heaven (1 John 5:16; 1 Cor. 11:30; James 1:14-15)

START

You were a personal witness of someone's sin.

Step 1 | You must deal with it!

Reveal his/her fault in private. Motivate him/her to change. (Matt. 18:15)

Step 2 | Person continues

Include 2 or 3 people. Motivate person to change. (Matt. 18:16)

Step 3 | Person continues

Reveal person's fault to the church. (Matt. 18:17; 1 Tim. 5:20)

Step 4 | Person continues

Remove person from the fellowship & turn away from him. (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Thess 3:6)

Person continues

You have pleased the Lord. (Ezek. 33:7-9)

Stop and trust God
For what will happen

Person listens & stops

Stop!
You have restored your brother

Person repents

You have restored your brother
Return him to fellowship with a period of restoration.

sins and ongoing patterns of sin.

Go To The Straying Christian. Next, Jesus says that if we see a fellow Christian sin, we must go to him or her. That is the Father's will. That is the first hard step. This requires prayer, wisdom (James 1:5) grace and a commitment to be obedient. It reveals your heart. Galatians 6:1 tells us how to go to that person.

Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Gal. 6:1 (NASB)

The apostle Paul wrote these words. He tells us that if a fellow Christian is caught in a sin, the goal is restoration and not condemnation. This is an important concept. There are two points that we need to note about restoration. The first is that if someone sinned “against you,” it would be very difficult to go to that person and demand that they apologize or repent to you. Imagine trying to be objective, gentle and to seek restoration! That is why Jesus told Peter to just keep forgiving (Matt. 18:21-22). The second thing to note is that restoration requires gentleness. This includes grace and love. When Paul says that those who are “spiritual” are to go to the one caught in the trespass, the “spiritual” are those who are filled with the Holy Spirit. They also have at least an understanding of the process of church discipline. Those who been involved in church discipline understand that it is important to be on guard against sinning because sometimes the one you talk with gets angry with you, shares explicit details about their sin in an attempt to help you understand their struggles, or refuses to hear you, for example. The goal is to not commit more sin.

Show The Straying Christian. Next, Jesus says that the reason for going to the straying Christian is to show them their sin in the hope of restoring them to holiness. The Greek word that is translated as “show” in Matthew 18:15 is *ελεγψο*. The word means “to state that someone has done wrong, with the implication that there is adequate proof of such wrongdoing—to rebuke or to reproach.”² The word

that Jesus used for “show” is a special Greek word that means you are objective in your conclusions. In John 7:24 Jesus encouraged us to judge righteously.

Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment. John 7:24 (NASB)

That is, when and if we observe a fellow Christian in sin, we must try to be objective and not be motivated by some wrong attitude towards the person. We are not to be biased or jump to conclusions. Unfortunately, observation alone may not give us the true picture of the person's sin.

I have found that when one is trying to help a straying Christian, it is important to start by asking questions. I start by reminding the person of the situation. We talk about what I saw and try to understand what occurred. I usually discover that I do not understand everything that occurred accurately. But usually there is still a sin issue that must be addressed. Nicodemus reminds us in John 7 what we must do when we try to help.

Nicodemus (he who came to Him before, being one of them) said to them, “Our Law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it?” John 7:50-51 (NASB)

The purpose of Step 1 of church discipline is not condemnation, to rebuke or lecture them, but to understand what happened and appeal to them to stop their sin.

Do It In Private. Jesus tells us in Matthew 18:15 that this discussion must occur in private. This is designed to protect the reputation of the person *that you think* sinned. Consequently, there should not be any gossip. Gossip is simply sharing negative information about a person with someone else. Therefore, do not share what you think is true (that negative information about them) with anyone. We can seek advice as to how to proceed or how to counsel, but the person's name must never be mentioned. You are responsible for protecting their reputation. It is possible that you might be wrong. There is a story about a young man who once printed a flyer that wrongly accused a neighbor of wrong doing. No sooner had he finished passing out the flyers when he dis-

2. Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains. New York: United Bible Societies.

covered that he was wrong. So he went to a farmer friend. He asked, "What should I do?" The farmer said it is a little late. The damage has already been done. You can never erase the wrong information from the minds of the people. That is why Jesus said to go in private. The goal is restoration and not judgment.

If He Listens. Then Jesus adds that if the person listens and repents then "you have won your brother." That is the goal. No one else should know about the situation or that church discipline had been pursued.

CHURCH DISCIPLINE - STEP 2. But what do we do if the person does not listen or they listen but are not repentant, that is, rejects the rescue attempt? At this point, one must be completely objective and seriously consider the possibility that the accused did nothing wrong. If however it is factually and objectively concluded that the person did commit the sin, then Jesus gives us the next step.

But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. Matt. 18:16 (NASB)

The next step is to contact one or two more people and ask them to participate in a potential church discipline situation. These new people must not be given any names or details about the situation until they commit to joining the person who initially confronted the supposedly sinning person. Every effort should be made to protect the accused since it is possible that the accuser is wrong. Once they agree to join in the restoration attempt, then only a general overview of the accusation should be given, such as, "we will be discussing the possibility that he/she committed adultery," or "we will be discussing the possibility that he/she lied," etc. Specific details of the sinful behavior should not be given. No other specific details should be given other than the time and place of the next meeting during which the second step of confrontation will be performed. To provide more information would be gossip since at this point it is possible that these new people may not want to be involved in the rescue attempt once they discover 1) the name of the person and 2) the nature of the charges. Therefore, the name of the stray-

ing lamb must be spared until the new people understand what is expected of them and they agree to help. If these new people are still willing to participate then give them the name of the person and nothing more. They will discover the specific charges against the accused during the meeting when the charges are discussed. Their role is to determine if the charges are valid and to witness the responses of the accused and the accuser. They should not view their role as supporters of the accuser. Instead, their role should be one of objective witnesses. Their purpose is to determine the truth. Maybe the accuser is wrong.

Witnesses Duties. Assuming that one or two people have agreed to help you, what are they to do? Jesus says that they are to join you so that "every fact may be confirmed." The Greek word translated as "confirmed" is *ιστημι*. The Greek word in this situation means "to make firm or fix." That is, their responsibility will be to witness the testimony of the straying lamb during the future meeting. The Greek word in verse 16 that is translated as "fact" is actually the Greek word *ρημα*, and it means "spoken word." That is, Jesus says the two or three witnesses are to go to the meeting and listen to the spoken words of the straying lamb. They are to follow the principles given in Proverbs 18:17; John 7:24, 50-51. They are to be witnesses who determine if the accusation(s) of the accuser are really true. They are not just to believe that the accusations are true. It is possible that the "straying lamb" is not straying at all and the accuser has misunderstood the situation or has some sinister motives. There are many people with smooth and flattering speech who deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting, such as these two or three witnesses.

Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting. Romans 16:17-18 (NASB)

Maybe the "rescuer" is overzealous.

Mouth of The Witnesses. The goal of the witnesses is jus-

tice, the protection of the one being accused. But if the witnesses conclude that the accused is truly straying, then they are to call the straying lamb to repentance. If the person repents, then they have rescued him/her from sin. Jesus' instruction in step two is an attempt to guarantee justice, echoing Deut. 19:15.

A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed. Deut. 19:15 (NASB)

Since the accusation against the “rescuer” is going to share damaging information about the accused to one or two other witnesses and potentially to the church (next step), two or three witnesses are now required. That is the principle that God established in Deuteronomy. This reveals the “heart” of our God who wants to protect a potentially innocent man or woman from unfair accusations or from a potentially overzealous accuser - “rescuer.” Matthew 7:3-5 echoes this potential problem.

Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. Matt. 7:3-5 (NASB)

Such situations have occurred and do occur such as an over-

zealous rescuer, maybe a legalist, who thinks they know how everyone should live their life. Unfortunately, legalists have a big log in their eye called legalism. 1 Timothy 5:19-20 warns us to follow the same principle for the elders of the church. There are to be no exceptions. I love our God. He is just and fair and wants us to be just and fair too!

CHURCH DISCIPLINE - STEP 3. If the witnesses determine that the accusation(s) are true, they are to call the straying lamb to repent. If the individual repents then as Jesus said, “you have won your brother.” But if the straying lamb

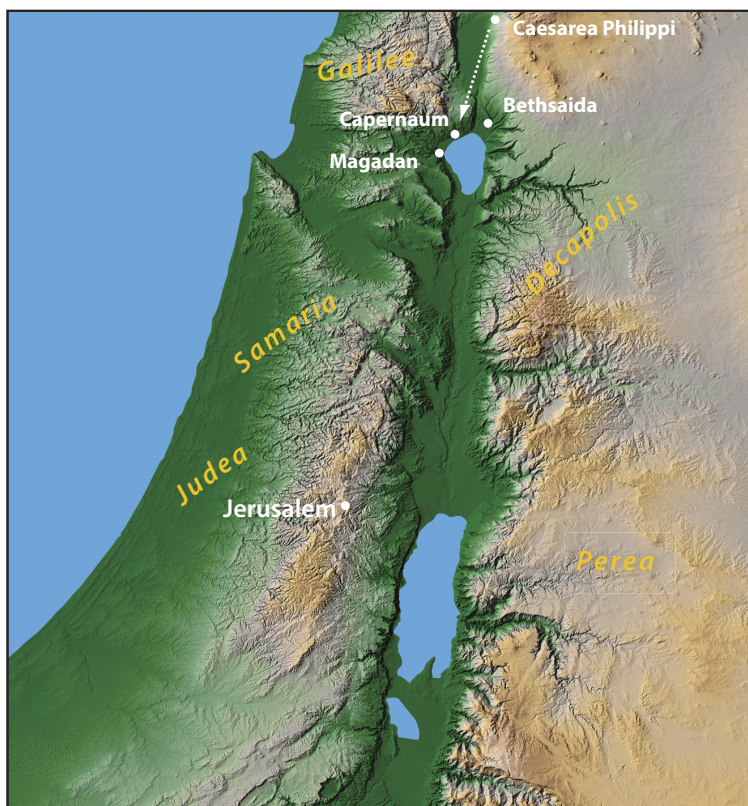
refuses to repent then the “rescuer” and witnesses are to take the next step in the church discipline process and share the situation with the leadership of the church.

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church . . . Matt. 18:17a (NASB)

Since Matthew 18:17 simply says that the rescuer and witnesses are to tell it to the church, some believe that the situation should be shared in a public meeting without the knowledge of the church leadership. But it

is hard to believe that is what Jesus means. How could this occur unless the rescuer and witnesses surprised the pastor, leaders and congregation during a public meeting? 1 Corinthians 14:33 expressly prohibits confusion in the church, and imagine surprising the leaders to whom the entire congregation is to be in submission (Heb. 13:17). No, it is best to understand the third step as telling the elders of the church.

The elders must listen to the accusation from the “rescuer” and witnesses. The elders can then either accept the testimonies and/or investigate it further exercising the same care for privacy and justice. I have seen church discipline



situations take as long as one year. The goal of church discipline is not to punish but to appeal and restore. Care must be taken, but the process must continue until they repent or will not repent.

CHURCH DISCIPLINE - STEP 4. If the person will not repent, then the situation must be shared with the congregation.

... and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Matt. 18:17b (NASB)

How it is shared with the congregation is a crucial decision. The congregation should be briefly reminded of the principle of church discipline from Matthew 18:15-18. The name of the individual(s) must be given, the facts of the sin stated - not opinions and speculations - and encouragement to the congregation to ignore the individual until repentance occurs. Now the last part is the difficult part - ignoring the individual because it seems unloving, lacking compassion. But check out Jesus' statement, "let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." The Jews avoided Gentiles and tax collectors (Matt. 11:19; Mark 2:16). The goal is to abandon the individual and thus encourage them to long to return and, consequently, repent.

EXAMPLES OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE. There are several examples of church discipline in the New Testament. 1 Cor. 5:1 is an amazing example of church discipline. It is given to us by the apostle Paul. Everyone knew about the sin but they did nothing. A quick reading of 1 Corinthians 5 reveals that a young man was having sexual relations with his stepmother (v. 1). Paul rebukes the Christians in Corinth for ignoring the sin. In the second verse he says that they are arrogant and should have been mourning the situation.

Maybe they are like some Christians today who do not want to get involved. Maybe they were indifferent or reasoned that the sin was okay as long as it did not hurt anyone. But the apostle rebukes them for doing nothing about the sin. In verse 6 Paul warns them that a little leaven leavens the whole lump. Paul was using the illustration of bread that had yeast. Leaven was the yeast. Paul wants to understand that when a little yeast starts to grow, it will eventually perme-

ate the entire loaf. Sin is the same way. One person starts to gossip; then others soon follow, especially if the leadership gossips. Leaders are examples to the flock (Heb. 13:7, 17; 1 Pet. 5:3). If the leaders gossip and others hear them, then gossip appears to be acceptable and eventually "everyone is doing it." A little leaven does leaven the whole lump. Paul's point is that a little sexual sin - a little incest - and eventually others think it is okay with the church leaders and others will do it too! 1 Cor. 15: 33 describes the problem well,

Do not be deceived: "Bad company corrupts good morals." 1 Cor. 15:33 (NASB)

What Paul recommends to these Corinthians alarms some Christians. Paul says that the couple should be removed from the church. Then he proceeds to say that since the congregation had done nothing about the situation, he would take action and turn the man over to Satan "for the destruction of the flesh" (1 Cor. 5:3-5). Then he rebukes them again in verse 6-13. He tells the congregation to have nothing to do with the man. He says,

Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. 1 Cor. 5:7 (NASB)

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one . . . REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES. 1 Cor. 5:9-13 (NASB)

Paul's comments agree with Jesus' teaching in Matthew. Remove the man and have nothing to do with him.

There are other examples of church discipline in the New Testament. However, only the conclusion is given to us. In 1 Tim. 1:20 Paul hands two men over to Satan so that

they will learn to not blaspheme. In 2 Tim. 2:17 the apostle openly rebukes two men for false doctrine. In 3 John 1:9 the apostle John rebukes a man called Diotrophes for being a dictator.

EXAMPLE OF RESTORATION. 1 Corinthians 5 is difficult to read because the sin is so flagrant, the church leadership and congregation are so numb to sin, the rebuke from Paul is so unexpected and the man must have been in misery due to the public rebuke and removal from the congregation. Like wow, that must have been tough. 2 Corinthians 2 reveals that the man did finally repent. In verses 6-11 Paul encourages the Corinthians to comfort and forgive the man so that he did not experience “excessive sorrow” (v. 7). This brief statement reveals some important principles about church discipline. The first is that church discipline can be successful and it will work. This man eventually became repentant and sorrowful. Second, when repentance occurs the church must show love and forgiveness. Verse 10:1-11 says that we are to forgive for at least two reasons: 1) for the sake of Christ and 2) so that “no advantage would be taken of us by Satan.” Satan always wants to cause trouble.

I am amazed that Paul had to rebuke the church because they were unwilling to forgive and show compassion to the man. Paul had to rebuke them because they would not perform church discipline on the man. Then he had to rebuke them because they would not show compassion and forgiveness after church discipline was successful. What a sad portrait of the hearts of sinful men and women.

CONCLUSION. What is the purpose of church discipline? It is to rescue a fellow Christian from sin. The parable of the straying lamb illustrates the need. We are to be those who care enough to go and help. We must not be indifferent to a straying - sinning Christian. They need to be rescued.

I have seen success stories. It just requires grace, love, patience and a caring heart.