

Oct 4, 2020

# Matthew 18:15-18

## Accountability & Discipline: 5 Steps

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What do you do when someone you love has a runny nose? You shove a Q-tip up their nose! But before-covid, what would you do? You'd hand them a tissue. That's it. Maybe you'd say, "Your nose is running. Here's a tissue." But what if they don't want to wipe their nose? What if they don't realize they're sick?

You could forcefully wipe their nose with a **tissue**, like I do with my son, who by the way, is getting better all the time at wiping his nose. You could pray for them, "Lord, would you help them see their need to wipe their nose?" You could encourage them to go see a doctor, "I think you should talk to a doctor. They might have something to tell you." Or if it get's really bad, you could setup a surprise medical intervention. "Hey, how'd we get to the doctor's office? Might as well stop by and say hello!"

When someone you love has a drippy nose, you want to help them out. Church people get sick too, not just physically sick, but spiritually sick. We get spiritual runny noses. By that I mean... we get stuck in sin. Our hearts get sick and we need a brother or sister in Christ to offer us a tissue. We need them to turn our attention to Jesus, and the price he paid on the cross to forgive us of our sins, not so that we can continue sinning, but so that we can be forgiven and made new.

Today I want to talk about **5 steps** the Bible gives us to offer our brother or sister in Christ a tissue. We want to restore them and see them healthy again. Two weeks ago we talked about the first step.

### **Step 1. Prayerful self-examination and discernment.**

We looked at **Matthew 7:1-5** and **James 4:1-3** and reviewed how important is to get real with yourself before you get real with someone else. We talked about **four categories** of sin we should address: the sin dishonors the name of Jesus, damages your relationship with them, is hurting others, or is hurting them.

Remember **airplanes**? Remember what it's like to travel places pre-covid? Before the flight takes off, what do the flight attendants do? They run you through a pre-flight safety check. They tell you where the exits are, where the life vests are in case of water landing, and that the oxygen masks will fall down if needed. What do they always tell parents? Put your mask on first; before putting a mask on your child. They don't want you to pass out before you can help your child. Take care of your own need; then help those you love.

Before we ever wipe someone else's **spiritual nose**, we need to make sure we can breathe. We deal with our own sin before dealing with another's. Once we've got our own mask on, and have a renewed and restored relationship with Jesus, by all means help a fellow believer out, but first let's deal with our own sin. *Step 1. Prayerful self examination and discernment.*

### **Step 2. Private one-on-one conversation.**

Now we come to the Scripture where Jesus himself explains how to do accountability and church discipline.

**Matthew 18:15** (ESV) "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."

Accountability starts within relationship. Jesus calls a fellow believer here a "brother." This isn't a biological brother or sister, but a Christian one. The word brother suggests commitment and relational ties. Siblings

care for each other. It takes time to develop relationship, not just with the purpose of correcting, but out of genuine love for one another.

Having a genuine relationship helps us be gentle when we correct one another. Our foundation verse says to restore those caught in sin “in a spirit of gentleness”(Gal 6:1 ESV). Jesus tells us in the great commandment to “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mark 12:31 NIV). If we’re to take that same command and apply it to correction, we’re to correct others as we’d like ourselves to be corrected, graciously, gently.

Your nose is drippy. You have a cold. Your spouse, who is so attentive, notices and says, “Here, let me grab you a tissue.” You expect them to walk to the bathroom or bedroom to get the tissue, but then you hear them open the basement door. They go downstairs and a few minutes later reemerge. They hold out their hand and offer you a nice soft piece of... **sandpaper!** Grit 36! Super rough. You could strip a concrete floor with it! If they handed sandpaper to you, would you blow your nose with it? No! Would you be happy with what they gave you? No! You’d think, “Is this person crazy?” They want me to blow my nose with sandpaper? That’s why we have to be gentle when talking with others about their sin. I know I’ve tried to wipe people’s noses with sandpaper, and maybe you have too. Lets forgive each other; and offer tissue instead.

Not only should this conversation be relational and gentle, but it should be private. Jesus says to go to him “alone.” Go by yourself. Tell him or her their fault, and only him or her their fault.

Little Jimmy has a huge green booger sticking out of his nose and his sister **Bethany** is concerned for him. But instead of telling Jimmy, Bethany calls Rick and says, “You got to see this booger! It’s so big!” Then she texts her friend Glenda. “Do you have any tissue at your house? Jimmy has a giant green booger.” Finally, when she’s at school later that week she mentions to Cameron, “Jimmy has really been getting a lot of boogers lately. Would you pray for him?” ...Bethany, tell Jimmy he has a booger! Talk with him directly. Otherwise, you’re the booger!

To not address the one who is sinning directly, is sinning itself. I can be tough to handle because we get frustrated with people when they sin, especially if their sin hurts us. Sometimes I feel like I’m solving the problem by telling others; but actually, I’m just spreading the flu. I’m making it worse. I need to speak to the one who has sinned against me, or is caught in sin, directly.

Monday morning I’m going to finally be sending out our *Church Accountability & Discipline Policy*. I hope you’ll take the time to read it. You might notice a section called “Clarifying Elder Involvement.” In this section, we’ve explained how if you have a problem with someone, please go and talk with them first before coming to the Elders. Until you’ve had that personal, private, gentle, one-on-one conversation, we’re not going to discuss the issue as a board.

One girl shared online how at her mom’s kindergarten there’s a small stool in the corner with a picture of Jodie Foster stuck to the wall. It looks like a shrine to her. This girl asked her mom what the picture was about and her mom told her that when the kids come to the leaders to tell them what another kid did, they send them to tattle to Jodie Foster. They call the picture “Miss Tattle.” Apparently it works pretty well. This was several years ago, but another preschool put up a picture of the President Obama, and told the kids when they had a problem with each other to “Go tell the President.”

When someone hurts us, we don’t have to settle for Jodie Foster or President Obama or even the Elders. We can go straight to Jesus and tell him our hurts and he listens. But then if our hearts are still hurt, he tells us in the Bible to go and talk with those who have sinned against us. Tattle creating a culture of mistrust and gossip, not grace and truth. Let’s do our best to talk with others directly and gently. But if you’ve talked with the person directly, actually talked with them (not text or email), and they won’t listen, then by all means talk

with an Elder because that follows Jesus' steps. *Step 1. Prayerful self examination and discernment. Step 2. Private one-on-one conversation.*

### **Step 3. Private conversation with 1-2 other witnesses.**

**Matthew 18:16** (ESV) 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.

So if the individual in sin won't listen, is still unrepentant, you take one or two other witnesses. What does Jesus mean by witnesses. Do those witnesses have to see the sin happen (Deut 17:6)? Our Elders talked quite a bit about this; and this is what we agreed upon:

**Witness** - A witness is normally someone who has personally observed a sin or pattern of sin in someone's life (Deut 19:15; Matt 18:15-16). A witness may also be a mature believer who can help establish a behavior or action as sinful based on Scripture, even if they have not necessarily observed the action itself.

So for example, imagine you talk with someone, but they don't agree that what they're doing is sin. They agree that they're doing it, but they disagree that it's sinful. Then go speak with a mature Christian believer, maybe one this person trusts, and ask them to come and speak to the situation. The three of you meet to talk it out again. Hopefully, that will lead the one who is spiritually sick to confession and repentance.

Obviously, this is all very difficult. Accountability done right is hard. It's long and it takes time. It's not easy. It costs time, effort, energy, and prayer. I've found that when I'm going to have a hard conversation, I need to take time to pray and read Scripture and sense the Lord's presence. I need him to give me wisdom and peace before I'm ready to do anything. Generally, it's a bad idea to try and correct out of anxiety or anger. It takes time to get our hearts right. We don't rush in to try to fix a situation. Before bringing anyone else in, make sure you've spent that time with the Lord. You can tell him! Then attempt that one-on-one conversation.

But what if the individual still won't repent of their sin? We're still within the accountability process; it just get's elevated. If someone in your family is sick; and they won't listen to anyone else. They won't see a doctor. What do you do? Get the sandpaper, right!? No! Get lots of tissue boxes and call a family meeting.

### **Step 4. Present this issue to the church members.**

**Matthew 8:17a** (ESV) If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church...

This is only the second time the word "church" (ekklēsia) is used in the gospels, the other being when Jesus tells Peter he's the rock upon which he'll build his church (Matt 16:18). By church here, we do mean the members of the church. We don't want to just shout this person's sin to everyone in a worship service, and since this other member has made a commitment to the membership, those would be the ones for whom we'd call a meeting. It would be up to the Elders if they would allow non-members.

So someone comes to the Elders and says, "I've talked with this person about a sin. They didn't listen. I took a witness. They still didn't listen. Now I'm coming to you. Is it time to take this to the church?" Our Elders would review the steps, talk with those involved, including the unrepentant individual, and then if necessary call a meeting. Obviously, as Elders and pastors, we hope it never get's to this point. But if sin is lethal, shouldn't we be willing to call a family intervention? A family intervention isn't about ganging up, but about getting the one you care about the help they need.

But if talking about the situation with the church body doesn't work, that's when we finally get to church discipline... *Step 1. Prayerful self examination and discernment. Step 2. Private one-on-one conversation. Step 3. Private conversation with 1-2 other witnesses. Step 4. Present this issue to the church members.*

## **Step 5. Church members enact church discipline.**

**Matthew 8:17b-18** (ESV) ...And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Having a conversation is not church discipline. Taking witnesses is not church discipline. Calling a meeting is not church discipline. Church discipline happens only when the gathered church body together votes to bring someone "under church discipline" or to "enact church discipline." That doesn't have to happen right away. The Elders and members may try to give the individual caught in sin more time to repent, but at some point, if still unrepentant, the one caught in sin needs to be brought under discipline. Here's what church discipline **means** at Cornerstone.

The members may enact church discipline by:

- A. Officially declaring that they do not recognize the confession of faith of the unrepentant sinner and identify them as a non-believer;
- B. Removing the non-believer from church membership;
- C. Refusing to serve the Lord's Supper to the non-believer; and
- D. Calling the non-believer to repentance and faith.

Why do we do these? If the person is genuinely a Christian, we want to shock them back to reality. Like **defibrillators** applied to the chest, we hope being called a "non-Christian" by the church body and by being refused the Lord's supper they'll wake up (1 Cor 11:27). We're not trying to call them a mean name, but to say, "Hey, we're not really sure where your heart is at, but we don't think you're a Christian because Christians repent." The point of accountability and church discipline is not to punish, but to restore. Jesus died to heal broken people.

On the other hand, if they're not a genuine Christian, we hope the call to repentance will convict them and lead them to repentance and faith. Jesus said to treat the one under discipline like a "Gentile and a tax collector"? How did Jesus treat those kinds of people? While he did not spend much time with Gentiles, he ate and drank with tax collectors and spent time with them.

**Matthew 11:19a** (ESV) The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'

Just like we're supposed to spend time with people who don't know Jesus yet, and call them to repentance, that's what we do here. Church discipline is a lot like evangelism. Someone is not a Christian; then tell them about Jesus and the forgiveness he offers and invite them to church.

There may be situations where part of the church discipline is removing someone from attending the church for a period of time, for their safety or the safety of others. I'm going to talk a little bit more about that in our next sermon, the final week of our series. Our five steps are:

*Step 1. Prayerful self examination and discernment.*

*Step 2. Private one-on-one conversation.*

*Step 3. Private conversation with 1-2 other witnesses.*

*Step 4. Present this issue to the church members.*

*Step 5. Church members enact church discipline.*

Imagine Tom and Jane are having a rocky season in their marriage. It's so rocky that Tom begins flirting with one of his coworkers, someone he feels gets him and appreciates him for who he is. Pretty soon he's sneaking out to go see her. Jane already knew their relationship was off, but senses things are just getting worse. Tom is more distant than ever.

Over a drink after work one night Tom boasts to Ken about his new relationship with his coworker. Ken is shocked. He's not only Tom's coworker, but he goes to the same church. Ken knew Tom's marriage was in a tough spot, and had been praying for him, but he didn't realize it was that bad. That night he goes home and begins to pray and study his Bible. He searches his heart for the shortcomings in his own marriage and confesses to the Lord how hurt he was by his parent's divorce. He doesn't want to operate out of any sort of hurt or vindictiveness. Ken re-reads through Matthew 18 and prays for his next step.

That weekend Ken swings by Tom's. He asks him questions; about his marriage, and when the relationship with the coworker started. Tom seems embarrassed, but when Ken pushes him on it, Tom isn't ready to give up the relationship. "She just makes me feel so happy" he says. "Doesn't God want me to be happy?"

Ken goes home feeling like he said what he was supposed to say, but also like Tom was stalling. Ken asks his wife to check in on Jane, but doesn't give her the gritty details. He knows it's best if Tom confesses directly to Jane. Together they pray for their marriage.

Ken, not sure what to do, but wanting to follow Jesus, goes to one of his church elders to talk the situation through, explaining how he has already had a personal conversation with Tom, but that it went nowhere. Together, they ask Tom to meet up with them to talk. Tom is reluctant, but agrees. Ken and the elder share their own marriage stories, the ups and downs, and also how the Bible only allows divorce in very specific instances, and this isn't one of them.

Tom says he'll stop seeing his coworker, and Ken and the elder pray with him and say they'll check in on him. Everything goes well for a couple weeks. Ken doesn't see Tom talking with the coworker anymore, but one day he walks by Tom's office and they're inside flirting. Ken pulls Tom outside and asks, "What's going on?" Tom admits he hasn't stopped talking with his coworker, and is probably going to get a divorce.

Ken is dumbfounded. He calls the elder that night; and they decide it's time to meet to discuss. They meet; pray, and decide to reach out to both Jane and Tom. It's gotten past the point of Tom being able to tell Jane.

Two of the Elders approach Tom and two approach Jane. Tom evades and is non-committal. Jane is saddened, but she is not shocked. She thought Tom might be doing something like this, but she didn't know what to do. She wants to work on their marriage but she knows she's made mistakes.

The Elders meet again to pray and process. They try to give Tom more time; but Jane calls to tell them he has moved out and filed for divorce. He's no longer attending church or the men's breakfast. The Elders call Tom to tell them that they and Ken are taking this to the church body for church discipline.

Tom yells at them, angry, saying that they can't do that. The Elders remind him of his membership and covenant to the church body. They call a closed meeting for the church members. They invite Tom, but he doesn't show. They explain the situation to the church membership. They're all shocked and saddened. They decide not to enact church discipline quite yet but to pray and reach out to Tom.

They give Tom another two weeks, but he doesn't repent and keeps going. Finally, the Elders call another meeting to recommend bringing Tom under church discipline. This time Tom shows up. He sits silently in the back; arms folded. One by one the members of the church get up, tell Tom how much they love him and Jane and want to help their marriage. Jane is there too. She looks pensive, lost in thought.

Finally Jane gets up and confesses that she knows she has hurt Tom and she is sorry. She also says how much his actions have hurt her and their kids. Finally, Tom's hard exterior cracks and he breaks down weeping. He rushes out the doors and leaves. They were ready to enact church discipline, but it seems like the Holy Spirit might be getting through. They decide to give Tom more time. That weekend Tom calls Ken and says he is sorry, and he's going to give his marriage another shot.

The Elders and Ken set up an accountability structure. Tom finds another job to not see the coworker he was interested in and begins to go to marriage counseling with Jane. The Elders discretely update the congregation that they are seeing improvement but ask for continued prayer and support for the family. Ken is grateful because God worked. It was hard and painful but Tom and Jane's marriage is still intact and they've returned to church.

Over time Tom becomes an outspoken advocate for accountability and even church discipline. He tells his coworkers and extended family members how much his church loves him, and that they told him the hard yet gentle truth when others just told him to do what made him happy. Over time Tom and Jane start mentoring and discipling other marriages in trouble. They see God save other relationships. Their kids are so happy their parents made it through. Ken continues to pray for Tom and Jane, and is amazed by God's grace in all their lives. That's accountability and church discipline. It's only possible by God's grace. Let's pray.

**Jude 24-25 (NIV)**

To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— 25 to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

*Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes endnotes and references, or share it through [Apple podcasts](#) or [Google Play Music](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).*

## Discussion Questions

1. What are the five steps of accountability and discipline?
2. Which of the five steps do you think is the most difficult for you?
3. What role does prayer and personal reflection play in the process?
4. How does the gospel impact how we do accountability and discipline?