

A Call to Discipline

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[0 : 0 0] is only a few verses. It will be important to keep those open, please. And let us ask once again for God to speak through his word. Gracious Father, we thank you that you are a God who delights to be known, that you have revealed yourself to us, Lord, in many times and in many ways through the prophets, but supremely and ultimately through your Son. And so, Lord, it is to him that we ask that you draw us near tonight by your Spirit. Father, we pray as we consider these few words, but challenging, that you would speak, O Lord, and that we, your servants, would listen. Help us, we pray, by your Spirit, to come to a right understanding and so to live the truth that you teach us. For this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, the summertime tends to be a wee bit quieter in the church, but something really very exciting that perhaps has passed us by a wee bit has been going on this summer. That is that lots of young guys have been recognized and sent out into ministry by our presbytery of the Free Church.

If you're here for the first time, if the Free Church is not your church, that is just our region, in our denomination in Scotland. Okay, I'm going to have to do a wee bit of translating, okay, as we get into this, as if Greek was not hard enough. So, four guys have been licensed to preach the gospel. Translation, they have been recognized as sound teachers and good preachers of the Bible.

And four, another four, have taken the next step and been ordained and inducted into ministry within churches. One only this morning. This is hot off the press. So, translation, they have been publicly and formally sent into gospel work. Some of you will know these guys. They've come and preached for us at different times in the past. Kieran Kelleher, Craig Anderson, Jeff Murray, and Will Lind.

And this is a wonderful, wonderful answer to prayer, isn't it? The Lord Jesus teaches us to pray to the Lord of the harvest, to send workers out into his harvest field. And so he is doing. And we praise him for that. And every time that happens, every time someone begins training for ministry, every time a trainee gets signed off as a minister, every time a church gets a brand new minister, it's an incredibly significant time. It involves worship and prayer. Vows are taken. Weighty words are spoken. It's a big deal. Now, some of the the questions that are asked are long and a bit hard to follow. But here's one that is asked on the occasion of an ordination that really sends shivers down my spine when I hear it. The guy being ordained is asked, are not zeal for the honor of God, love to Jesus Christ, and desire of saving souls your great motives and chief inducements to enter into the function of the holy ministry, and not worldly designs or interests. In short, why are you doing this? Is it not because you love God and desire his glory, and not any glory or gain of your own? And I start there, maybe to bring us up to speed, because in our short few verses this evening, Paul is pointing Timothy back to that day in his life when he was signed off, as it were, and weighty things were said of him. Because if you can look back, Timothy, says Paul, and say in a good conscience that your life is still in keeping with what was said about you on that day, well, then you are still fighting fit. It's when you can't say that, but you are heading to the rocks. But living in line with those weighty words, it doesn't just happen. Paul encourages

[4 : 31] Timothy to discipline, personal discipline, for Timothy as a Christian and a leader in the church to stay spiritually in shape, so he can keep fighting the good fight of the faith. But he goes on to say it also takes church discipline, so that the church stays healthy and spiritually whole. And both of these are challenging.

I think it's the first time I've ever preached on just three verses, partly because these are hinge verses in the letter connecting up the introduction and the body of the letter. But partly I wanted to give a sermon to these verses because if we don't teach discipline, we won't do discipline. And if we don't do discipline, then we are heading for shipwreck as Christians and as a church. Now, discipline is on a scale, okay? And when I say that, possibly what is coming to mind is some kind of awful heresy trial on the far end of the scale. But in fact, Paul is going to say that discipline begins right here in the heart. Okay, notice that these few verses are really instructions for Timothy and how Timothy is to deal with himself and his own life and doctrine. So firstly then, let's hear Paul's call to personal discipline. He writes there in verse 18, Timothy, my son, I'm giving you this command in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by recalling them, you may fight the battle well.

Now, these few verses, full as they are, I don't want us to spend much time on these prophecies. Okay, possibly again, what comes to mind is something dramatic and mystical, maybe someone standing up and saying, Timothy, God has told me he has great plans for you and he wants you to preach and teach and lead. Now, that could be what happened. We've got no record of it in Scripture, but not necessarily.

So we think of prophecy often as foretelling, kind of predicting what is to come, but very often in Scripture prophecy is simply foretelling, speaking from God what is true about the situation now.

And so the prophecies, they could be predictions about Timothy, but it's probably a bit simpler than that. Because what we do have on record is that true things were said about Timothy on a public occasion. He was recognized as being called by God. He was seen to conform to God's standards for church leaders. Then hands were laid on him, and Timothy himself responded with what Paul calls in chapter six a good confession. And so put together what we've got and what we have is something that looks very like what happened in Dundee this morning or what happened here a year ago, an ordination.

[7 : 44] That is a formal public setting apart of Timothy as a gospel minister. And that helps put this call to discipline into context, I think, for Timothy, because Paul then is saying, I'm giving you this charge in keeping with what was said about you at your ordination, so that by recalling what was said, you may fight the good fight. That makes much more sense to me anyway, than some random prophecies.

The age of the apostles was drawing to a close. What was beginning was the first generation of normal gospel ministers, not more Paul's or Peter's, but Timothy's and Titus's. And so Paul is calling Timothy to remember what was said when he became the first of the normal gospel ministers.

Now, sometimes we can think, even as Christians, well, you know, it doesn't matter what anyone says about me. I know who I am. Okay, forget anyone else's opinion. I know who I am. I'm pretty sure that must be pretty much every Disney song from the last 10 years in a nutshell. But it is important to us as Christians, isn't it, what our brothers and sisters in Christ have said about us, much more so if we are Christian leaders. One of the first questions that I was asked in the process towards becoming a minister was, who's encouraged you to do this? And if the answer had been nobody, I suspect that would have been the end of the interview. But since trust where the individuals had said they thought this would be a good idea, well, it gave me confidence to go through with it.

And similarly, when the church as a whole said, we see that God has called you, given you this work, put me here, well, it gave me confidence to go through with it and do it.

And it wouldn't be wrong, would it? If I had ever wondered, what am I doing here? To think back and find confidence in those words and be strengthened to go on with the work.

[10 : 03] Now, you'll be glad to know I never have wondered, what am I doing here? But there will be times, won't there, when we wonder whether God has got the right person. At times, a crisis of confidence, we wonder, what does he want with me?

Am I really a Christian? Or doubt, perhaps, do I have what it takes to live the Christian life? Or to devote myself to this area of Christian service?

Well, when those doubts arise, we can and we should turn to God's words, shouldn't we? But we can and also should remember what trusted and faithful and godly men and women have seen in us and said about us.

Yes, listen to the Bible, but listen to those who know you best, who have walked with you in Christ, shared the gospel with you, who have recognized his will for you and pointed you consistently towards it.

In short, Paul is saying, listen to the voice of the church. Brothers and sisters, give each other reason not to lose heart.

[11 : 15] Perhaps, won't you recognize what is good and godly in others? Encourage one another, share with them a verse, perhaps, that reminds you of them.

Not in a way that flatters, but in a way that reminds them how God has been at work in their life. I was reading the other day about how the fruit of the Spirit includes patience.

And I thought of ye. You're such an example to me of what Paul means when he says to pray without ceasing. We've seen so much growth in you this past year and your faith and maturity and character.

These things that we struggle perhaps to see in ourselves, but that others can see in us and can say to us to help us to keep fighting the battle well.

That's Paul's point, isn't it? Not to puff Timothy up with pride, but simply to keep him walking on the hard and narrow path that leads to life.

[12 : 21] He wants Timothy to recall what others have said about him, so that by recalling them, you may literally fight the good fight. And this is fighting talk.

So we should, says Paul, cheer each other on. He wants to cheer Timothy on, doesn't he? But when push comes to shove, fighting also takes personal discipline.

Whether or not we keep fighting depends, humanly speaking, on being battle ready. And so how is Timothy to fight the battle well? Paul says, verse 19, So think back, he's saying, Timothy, to what others have seen in you, so that you can keep holding on now to what will keep you going in the future.

Two things that Timothy will need to keep a grip on if he is to fight the good fights. And one is the faith. Now notice, not your faith, not your personal faith, but faith.

Now what is the difference here? Well, some of you younger than me are into climbing, and you can tell me later if this is right. But I imagine if you were scaling the face of a cliff, you don't want to find yourself at any point holding on to the rope, but rather the rock.

[13 : 51] He ropes, yes. Robbie's nodding. Good. Ropes can snap, but rocks do not tend to snap. And that is the difference between holding on to your faith and the faith.

Your faith, the rope that keeps you connected to Christ, can fray and stretch and break and snap. And so Christians who find themselves holding on to their faith when they are having a crisis of faith, they end up falling.

But Christians who even when their faith is weak, hold on to the faith. Once for all delivered to the saints, the rock solid truths of Christ that do not change, they stay standing.

And so hold on to the faith, says Paul. Hold on to Christ. Now that takes real discipline of heart. To say, my soul is really weary and worn out and beaten and bruised, but Christ does not change, and the truth doesn't change.

And the faith is still mine to cling to, even when my faith is in tatters. That is spiritual discipline at work, the result of spiritual training.

[15 : 18] When our hearts are weak, still to cling on, still to do the heavy lifting. Well, how can I, says Timothy. Well, get the church to spot you, says Paul.

Have you seen that in the gym? Someone's bench pressing a weight that's far, far too heavy for them to lift. What do they do? Well, they get someone to spot them, that is to stand over them, and say, lift, lift, lift, lift, lift, lift, lift, lift, lift.

And when the bar starts to drop, that guy will take some other weight to keep the bar lifting, lifting, lifting, until it's done. And friends, that is me and ye.

Every week, Sunday by Sunday, that's part of the point of life groups, we tell ourselves to come to church, to pick up and read, even when we don't feel like it, because we know we're training to fight the good fight.

But regularly, we need someone to spot us, to reinforce our discipline, to support our training. I need that. And you need that.

[16 : 28] And so recall what others have said about you. Cling to the faith. And also onto a good conscience, says Paul. In fact, one of the books I read this week said this, conscious disobedience will kill our spiritual life.

Do not sin against your conscience. I wonder what you think about that. Is that going too far? To say, even if I know it's a bit wrong, well, I'm still going to maybe share that wee bit of gossip.

Or still maybe not worry about coming to church quite so often. Or still go back to that website. I know it's wrong. But that's not such a big deal, is it?

If only I know about it. If only I think it's wrong. Well, friends, Paul is saying, when your conscience is telling you no, and you do not listen, it's like you seeing the blinking light of the lighthouse on the rocks.

And instead of turning the other way, sailing straight towards the rocks, your conscience is a God-given gut feeling. That when it's trained by Scripture, and in the hands of the Spirit, will warn us when we are at risk of disobeying Him.

[17 : 46] But a conscience is a bit like a fence. It's put up to stop us going somewhere. But you can climb a fence if you want to. And it's easier once you've done it once to do it again.

And after you've done it a few times, well, the fence starts to look a little bit worse for wear. And keep doing it. And eventually that fence will be flat on the floor, and you will be walking over it without even trying.

Brothers and sisters, you can do that to your conscience. And Paul is saying, don't. Okay, we know, don't we? What it does to our hearts when we say on repeat, I know it's wrong, I won't do it again.

And then we do it again. What happens? Well, it runs our faith into the ground. We get tired of saying sorry. We lose the will to fight.

And eventually we lose our sense of need for Christ. And stop coming to Him. Brothers and sisters, don't underestimate the spiritual worth of a good conscience.

[18 : 54] Holding on to it takes discipline. Even our conscience is in line with God's word, working with God's spirit. We choose to listen and follow it. Not to close our ears, silence it, walk over it.

And so Paul is saying, personal discipline, what does it take? Well, cheer each other on. Stay fighting the good fight by keeping hold of the faith and a good conscience.

But this discipline, it also has to stretch all the way down the scale, doesn't it? All the way through the church, even when that ends, in heartbreak and tears. So this is coming to church discipline now.

Because on the other end of the scale of discipline, Paul kind of holds up as a warning what he has had to do with these other two guys, Hymenaeus and Alexander.

And notice the very things Paul has told Timothy to hold onto, faith and a good conscience, are the things they have chosen to reject. And what has happened as a result, verse 19, they have suffered shipwreck with regard to the faith.

[20 : 03] So it's as if Timothy is navigating rough waters and now and again, he glances over and on the rocks stranded, he sees the wreckage of ships that have navigated the sea before.

And Paul is holding that up to warn him not to make the same mistake. Now, presumably Hymenaeus and Alexander, who are they? We don't know. Presumably they are some of the false teachers we've met before in this letter.

And here they are named. And he says, says Paul, he's had to do something with them. This is that verse 20. I've handed them over to Satan, he says, to be taught not to blaspheme.

Now, what has he done? Sounds weird, doesn't it? But it's something we read also about in 1 Corinthians 5, where Paul writes, hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh so his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord, which suggests that this is not some weird practice, but Paul's way of talking about a regular church practice.

And it's generally thought, this is a way that Paul speaks about putting someone outside the communion of the church, saying this person is no longer recognized as a Christian by the church.

[21 : 24] Now, sometimes in churches, that really sadly has to happen. But why has Paul done that here? Eugenius and Alexander, were they victims of heavy-handed shepherding?

Do we imagine them perhaps pleading with Paul not to do it? Well, no, he says they have denied the faith, they've trampled their consciences, they've refused every opportunity to turn and stop their false teaching.

And so spiritually, they have broken faith with the church, which leaves Paul no other option but to recognize that that faith had been broken to the point of being shipwrecked and to publicly and formally say that it was sadly so.

And so he has removed them from the protections of belonging to a church, being members of a church family, serving in a church body from sharing communion.

And in a sense, he can say he has handed them back to Satan as those who really belong in the kingdom of darkness, because they clearly don't belong in the kingdom of Christ.

[22 : 40] Now, I don't know if you've ever been part of a church where that has had to happen. I've only seen it happen once, and it was heartbreaking for everyone involved. But I read something this year that I think gets right to the heart of it.

So this year, perhaps, you know, the Lambeth Conference was held in Westminster Palace. It's a 10-year, not a 10-year meeting, a meeting that is held every 10 years of all the bishops and archbishops from around the Anglican world.

They get together. They're hosted by the Archbishop of Canterbury. But this year, some bishops, especially from Africa and Asia, refused to go because they saw unrepented of sin in their fellow Anglican bishops in the way that they treat the Bible.

Others did go, but they didn't take communion. And one of them, the Archbishop of South Sudan, really gets this. Listen to this.

The Lord's Supper, he says, is an outward sign of something deeper. So how can I do that when I know my brothers have gone wrong? I've criticized them, and they have not yet repented.

[23 : 54] Coming to spiritual things, then, there is no union there. The Lord's Supper is not just food. The Lord's Supper is not just food.

Sharing the bread and wine is a sign of our spiritual communion together in Christ. And so to share the bread and wine with people who in their lives are sinning and refusing to say sorry and refusing to turn back, well, how can there be outward communion, he's saying, when there is no spiritual communion?

See, the relationship there is not broken by the church that does the discipline. It is broken by those who refuse to repent.

Repent, what is that? Well, when they refuse to repent, when they've been challenged about their sin, they've refused repeatedly to turn to God and ask forgiveness and bring their lives or thoughts or words into line with the scriptures.

And so at a certain point, the church has to say, we cannot keep saying that this person is a Christian, even and especially when that person is an elder or a bishop or a preacher in the church.

[25 : 10] And that's what Paul's saying about these guys, isn't it? It's what the Archbishop of South Sudan is saying. Now, a few things that are worth saying really clearly about church discipline. The first is that there are a couple of stages that come before putting someone out of the church that give time and opportunities to repent.

Paul's just saying the outcome of this process has been this. But we heard from Jesus earlier on in our service, didn't we, in our first reading, that the first stage is simply a private one-on-one conversation as a quiet challenge to sinful behavior or pattern of behavior.

Okay, so you might see something that I do. Here's something that I say, get me to one side, take out your Bible and say, Joe, look what you are doing.

You need to repent. And I hope that there are some of you here who would do that. Okay, I'm not above that. I need that. And in a way, this first stage of church discipline should be going on pretty regularly in a church because we all sin and we all sometimes need to be challenged about that sin by others.

And it needs to be gracious. Okay, so what we don't need as a church is the sin police going around, okay, getting on everyone's back. But if you have the kind of relationship with somebody you trust and who trusts you, you share together spiritually, you walk together in the faith, sometimes we need that person in our life to say that this is not godly and this is not Christ-like.

[26 : 55] And so often the best question at that stage is to ask, well, who's close to this person? You can have a quiet word with them about what's going on. But say I said, no, I'm not sorry.

I was right and I would do it again. What happens then? Well, Jesus says onto stage two, get one or two others involved, he says. Now in a church context, probably this is going to involve an elder.

It's important, isn't it, to have someone with spiritual oversight who can reinforce what has been said, point out what is sin. And yet it is possible still for me to say, no, I'm not backing down.

I stand by what I did, what I said. Then we're onto stage three, says Jesus, where it is brought to the church. In our context here, that would be before the Kirk session, the elders meeting together.

And if I was at fault as a minister, that would be the presbytery. The church represented by its elders in session would challenge that sin yet again.

[28 : 04] And so, Jesus says three opportunities of increasing seriousness to recognize sin for what it is and an invitation to repent.

So, in case you're worried, okay, at this point, let me reassure you, you can't get into this position accidentally. Okay, you can't stumble into church discipline. It takes a deliberate, concerted effort not to repent, not to respond when you are being challenged about sin.

Another reassuring thing is that none of this is designed to be a punishment. And the church has got this wrong in the past and probably still does sometimes when it is done heavy-handedly and harshly when the whole point of the whole process is to restore this person lovingly into full communion with the church.

It's the church saying, we want you back with Christ, not walking away from him. On the other hand, churches at times have tried to be loving by not following this process and by saying, we're just not going to interfere with this person's sin.

But that is not how God has loved us, is it? If God had loved us by not getting involved, we would not be here. And that is not how he calls us to love each other.

[29 : 39] God's love involves challenging sin, giving opportunity to turn to Christ. And so the loving thing to do is to lovingly do church discipline.

The second thing to say here is that when church discipline doesn't work, when someone gets to that stage and still does not repent, well, the outcome is heartbreaking and yet it is still restorative.

That person is removed from the membership of the church, can no longer take communion in the church, can no longer serve in any way, isn't treated as a Christian until, until what, verse 20, does Paul say, until they do repent.

I have handed them over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme. Okay, this is tough love, but Paul wants these guys back in the flock even though he has put them out of the church.

The point is to bring them to their senses, to think, what have I done? What have I given up for the sake of my sin? See, the issue with church discipline is never really the sin itself.

[30 : 55] This is one of my favorite lines in the Westminster Confession of Faith. You call me a geek, but when you hear it, you'll understand, I hope. And it says, as there is no sin so small, but it deserves condemnation, so there is no sin so great that it can bring condemnation on those who truly repent.

Friends, there is no sin too big that God will not forgive it when we turn to him and ask for his forgiveness. The issue is if we do not repent.

That's what church discipline is dealing with, unrepentance, and what it's aiming for is true repentance, which means that normally unless the issue is false teaching, we want people, don't we, who are under church discipline to be in church on a Sunday, in the same way we would want any non-Christian in church on a Sunday to hear the gospel, to repent and believe.

Also, while those who are under church discipline shouldn't feel that nothing has changed, there should be a change in tone, while they should still know that people are praying for them and reaching out to challenge them, to bring them back.

See, the point of church discipline, even at its furthest, furthest reach, is to bring someone back to Christ and not to drive them further away.

[32 : 26] Paul still holds out this hope, doesn't he, for these guys, Hymenaeus and Alexander. Think what they've been doing. They've been teaching what is false in the church, misleading God's people.

They've been wolves among the sheep, and yet, there is no one too far gone to be brought back by loving church discipline.

So briefly, as we close, what is the application for us here? Well, first and foremost, as it was for Timothy, so it is for us, don't let your sin get to the point where church discipline is needed.

keep up personal, spiritual discipline. Keep short accounts with sin. Keep turning to the Lord, confessing, asking his forgiveness.

Keep growing in Christ. And if we as a church ever do, which I pray that we never will, have to resort to church discipline, please pray, pray, pray.

[33 : 36] for the brother or sister in sin, for your elders, and for your church. Okay, understand it.

Go with it. Submit to it. Understand why it is needed. See that we have not made it up, but it comes from the mouth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And understand that he wants us to do it in his way, with his heart, his compassion. It might break our hearts to do. But he is the shepherd who goes after the one who is lost.

He is the one who came into the world to save sinners. He is the one who seeks and saves those who are lost. And he chooses to do that through his church, through loving, challenging, church discipline.

May we never need to resort to it, but if we ever should, let us stand with the Lord Jesus Christ, the great shepherd of the sheep, and call sinners to repentance.

[34 : 47] Let's pray together. Gracious Father, your word is so clear, and it is so deeply challenging.

Father, we thank you that you have confronted us in our own sin, and through the years, our Father, you have not allowed us to stray. Father, we think back to the first time we were aware of you doing that.

Lord, we thank you for those who were part of that, Lord, whether it was our mother or father, a sibling, a grandparent, someone in our church, a friend.

Lord, we thank you that you call us to repentance, that you do get involved with our sin, and that you are so gracious that you will forgive any sin through the blood of Christ.

Our Father, how we thank you that he came to die for those such as us. Lord, who sin every day. Father, we thank you that he came and died on the cross for those who have wandered from him, for those who have rejected him.

[36 : 08] Father, we remember that your love was displayed in this, that it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us, and so we confess that we, none of us, are worthy of him.

And Father, we pray that we would know his grace. Father, we pray that you would protect our church. Lord, we pray that we would never need to undergo church discipline.

And yet, we pray, our Father, that you would grant us the grace and love and boldness to do so if it were required. Father, we pray that we would have the heart of Christ, Lord, compassionate to seek and to save and not to scare.

Father, we pray that you would grant us that gentleness. Lord, keep us, we pray, keep us seeking after him, keep us repenting, keep us going after him in faith, and help us, we pray, to help each other.

Lord, help us, we pray, to be a church family where we encourage each other, and speak the truth in love to one another, and build each other up to keep us fighting the good fight.

[37 : 16] For this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.