



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Matthew 18:15–20; 1 Corinthians 5:1–5

Gospel of Matthew

“Discipline in the Kingdom”

TRANSCRIPT

Now, the Scripture reading for this morning is found in the 18th chapter of the book of Matthew, and I want to read a few verses here and then turn over to 1 Corinthians chapter 5 and read a few verses there. Matthew chapter 18 verse 15 through verse 20:

“Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

I'd like for you to notice that last verse, particularly, “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them,” in the light of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians chapter 5. So, turn over there, and I'd like to read a few verses beginning with the first verse.

1 Corinthians chapter 5. The apostle writes,

“It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together (you'll notice those expressions, which are very similar to the expressions in Matthew 18 verse 20, where two or three are gathered together in my name) and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ (and over there he said, there am I in your midst; here he says he gathered together in spirit with them, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ—evidently, he regarded the Lord as present), to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.”

May God bless this reading of his Word. Let's bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for the privilege that is before us again to open the Holy Scriptures and to think about the things that concern the divine revelation.

We especially, Lord, thank Thee for passages such as the ones we have just read which have to do with matters of church and individual discipline. Evidently, Lord, Thou hast thought that these matters are of great importance, because the Word of God contains a great deal concerning them.

And we pray that we may come to understand them, and by the grace of God be enabled to carry them out as a local church, so that the testimony of the Lord Jesus may be strong and vital, and that the community in which we are may be blessed the Christian testimony, and that our own spiritual lives may be vital and strong.

Father, we do pray that through the ministry of the Word of God we may be drawn into a deeper relationship with Thee. May we grow in holiness, for we know, Lord, that there is a great need in our lives, individually and as a local church to grown in likeness to our Lord Jesus Christ.

We pray that Thou wilt increase our prayer life, increase our study of the Word of God and comprehension of it. And give us, Lord, a deeper love for the lost who do not know the Lord Jesus. And give us greater faithfulness in Christian testimony, in Christian worship, in Christian petition, and in Christian love, one toward another. O God, we pray that Thou wilt work mightily in our midst for that end.

We thank Thee for the common object of affection that we have, the Lord Jesus Christ, and we praise Thee for him. And we pray, O God, that we may be united, truly, in love for him and what he has done. And enable us to serve our living Savior in a way that will exalt his name and lift up his name in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.

Father, we ask Thy blessing upon the whole church of Jesus Christ, and that which we pray for ourselves we pray for the whole body. We pray that Thou wilt increase the numbers if it will please Thee, and we pray that the whole body will be strengthened and edified. May there be a return to the preaching of the Word of God, a return to true worship, and a return to intercessory prayer, and the exercise of the spiritual life that will mean a healthy relationship to Thee.

We again pray for those who are ill, especially those in the hospital. We pray Lord, that Thou wilt strengthen, that Thou wilt supply all the needs that exist. We ask, O God, that in the

ministrations that are given to them, there may be that which restores to health and strength. And comfort those who have lost loved ones recently. May, O God, the consolation of the Holy Spirit be their consolation. We do pray.

Now may Thy blessings rest on this meeting. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

[Message] The subject for the today is not really a very happy subject in some ways, and so I hope it is not too much of a let-down to announce that the subject is “Discipline in the Local Church.”

It's exceedingly rare to find a subject in which all of our evangelical community agrees outside the basic facts of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. After all, we cannot be evangelical if we do not believe that the Lord Jesus was the Son of God. We cannot be evangelical if we do not believe that the Son of God came and offered, by virtue of his atoning sacrifice, a redemptive work that avails for sinners, who by the grace of God have come to know their condition. We cannot be evangelical if we do not believe that the Lord Jesus was buried and rose again on the third day.

These basic facts of the Christian faith, which have to do with our redemption—accomplished by him—these basic facts make us what we are: evangelical believers. Now, once we get beyond these basic facts of the Christian faith, which have to do with our triune God, the person and work of Jesus Christ, the way of salvation, we have great areas of disagreement in evangelicalism. We have some believers who are premillennialists, and others who are amillennialists. In the case of church polity, we have members who are Episcopalian in their polity, and we have those that are Congregationalists in polity, and we have Presbyterians in polity. And then there are non-charismatics, and then there are charismatics who, nevertheless, are within the evangelical community. There are intellectually-minded believers who love the biblical doctrines and like to see a great stress on the teaching of the Word of God in doctrinal fashion, and then there are those emotionally-stirred believers who love devotional truth. And there [are] Calvinists and, alas, Arminians within the evangelical community. That's not to mention the fact that we frequently

disagree over questions such as civil obedience, capital punishment, divorce, abortion, evolution, and other ethical matters.

So it's very rare that we find one subject upon which all evangelicals can agree. But there is, I think, one thing upon which all of us agree, and it is that the church today stands in desperate need of spiritual growth. The standards of life found in the ordinary congregation are not distinguished by biblical holiness. Say what you will about the Puritans; for me, I love the Puritans. But say what you will about the Puritans, they had yearnings for holy living that marked them out as a different breed from their spiritual descendants.

Bishop Rile, who was a Puritan but an Anglican, said I've had a deep conviction for many years that practical holiness and entire-self consecration unto God are not sufficiently attended to by modern Christians in this country. Now, the bishop was writing about England, specifically—Great Britain, generally—but the same condition surely prevails here.

It's rather interesting that he traced this lack of development of holy living to politics, controversy, hardy spirit, and worldliness. Almost all, perhaps not all—I was a little surprised that he mentioned politics—of these conditions exist in our situation today and account for the spiritual malaise that characterizes the evangelical church.

But I'd like to suggest another reason why, today, we are not in the spiritual condition that we evangelicals should be in, and it is the problem of church discipline. Today, we do not have church discipline in our evangelical churches. Or, in some of them, we do have some measure of church discipline, and in a few, a very few, a biblical measure of church discipline, but in the great majority of our Christian churches today, in our evangelical churches, church discipline is not practiced very seriously.

We've lived through a half-century or more, at least a few of us, of racing apostasy in many of the large religious bodies that profess the faith of Jesus Christ. The apostasy has been able to proceed at the pace that it has proceeded because when apostasy raised its ugly head, like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, believers did nothing about it. They allowed evil to persist, and it

characteristic of evil that when it is allowed to persist, it spreads. We have had to learn by our sad experiences the truth of the statement that the Apostle Paul makes in the New Testament, “A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.”

There’s hardly a major denomination in the United States that’s not a living illustration of it, and the unfortunate experience has been repeated in countless individual, local churches. So, it’s not simply a denominational matter, it’s a matter of a local church. It can happen, also, in Believers Chapel. If discipline had been applied at the first signs of the departure of the faith, the purity of the body might have been continued.

Now, I grew up in a church in which discipline was not exercised when it should have been, and I lived through the experience of the rising tide of apostasy in the church, and the leaders did nothing about it. They allowed it to persist. Here and there a voice was raised in protest that others, even among believers, quickly squelched the voices of protest. And as a result, the evil continued to persist until finally, those that were afflicted with the evil outnumbered those that were not. And soon, the body fell into the hands of the unbelieving element. If discipline had been exercised, that situation might well have been avoided.

I noticed a long time ago that, as individuals who are Christians, we often are embarrassed by the very topic of church discipline. I used to visit individuals who were interested in being a member of the church in which I was a member. And in the midst of the discussion, I would outline the principles of the church. And finally I would come to the question which I would pose to them as prospective members: are you willing to abide by the leadership of the elders, and if it is necessary for them to exercise discipline, will you support them in the exercise of discipline, providing of course that the discipline is exercised in accordance with the Word of God?

And there would inevitably be on the faces of the individuals with whom I was speaking, a puzzled look. Church discipline? In fact, I had a few mention, what do you mean by church discipline? What would occasion the elders exercising church discipline? It is a fact that church

discipline is practically forgotten in our churches today. And that’s even more remarkable when we consider the immense amount of material in the New Testament that touches the topic.

Now, in addition to the present passage in Matthew chapter 18, there are important contribution to the subject in Romans chapter 16, 1 Corinthians chapter 5, 2 Corinthians chapter 2, Galatians chapter 6, 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, 2 Thessalonians chapter 3, 1 Timothy chapter 5, Titus chapter 1 and chapter 3, Hebrews chapter 13, 2 John and 3 John. All of these chapters in the New Testament contain important contributions to the subject of biblical discipline.

Now in the light of that, in the light of this vast volume on biblical discipline, it should be a vivid warning to the church of the importance of biblical discipline in the local church. And so it’s with a solemn sense of the gravity of this subject that I come to it this morning.

The passage in Matthew chapter 18 is not an easy passage to interpret, and I’m very sympathetic with individuals who say, “I find this a very difficult chapter to understand, and these verses particularly. One of the commentators has said, “This is one of the most difficult passages to interpret in the whole Gospel of Matthew,” but he has gone on to say that really the way we should interpret it is to avoid it and omit it. He said, as a matter of fact, it doesn’t ring true. It doesn’t even sound like Jesus. So evidently, he did not really say this himself.

He said it sounded more the regulations that were promulgated by an ecclesiastical committee, and therefore it represents and second or third stage in the tradition in which the local church, having come to certain principles of church discipline, now has them incorporated into the Gospel of Matthew amid the other sayings of our Lord. He’s even said that he’s too legalistic, and since our Lord is not legalistic, how can we have a chapter like this in which certain, specific injunctions are set forth by the Lord?

Now, I think we need to realize that when the commands of the New Testament are given, that does not mean that God is legalistic. Legalism does not mean that we cannot have commands addressed to us. The Bible is full of exhortations and commands. They are very direct, very

important. It's not legalistic for us to be told that we must do certain things. If that were so, then God would be a legalist.

Legalism is the view that we are able to do the commands of God in our own strength, and that we gain merit by the things that we do. But the New Testament gives us command after command after command, which we are to obey in the strength that God gives us, so that he graciously supplies the enablement to perform his commands. So the fact that there are some definite commands here does not mean that our Lord is legalistic.

This interpreter has also said that there is no limit to the forgiveness of God, and yet Jesus, according to this statement, says that men who are under discipline are to be treated as publicans and sinners. Now we shall deal with that when we come to the question, but our Lord begins the statement in Matthew chapter 18 and verse 15 by saying, “And moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee.”

We might ask, immediately, well what is the connection between this section and the preceding? We never really understand the Bible very well if we don't ask ourselves constantly the question, what is the connection between this passage and the one that has just preceded it? Now he has just warned the world not to offend one of the little ones who believe in him. He's warned the world, but if they cause the believers to stumble, they shall suffer a judgment worse than physical death. It would be much better to have a millstone hung around one's neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea than to offend one of God's little elect believing ones.

And he's further admonished them not to despise any of them. He has stated in the 10th verse, “Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones,” for the simple reason or reasons that they are the object of the care of the angels, that they are the object of the seeking and saving love of the Good Shepherd, and they are the objects of the Father's determinate will that not one of them should perish. Isn't that interesting? I rather like that text. “Even so, it is the will of your Father in heaven that not one of these little ones should perish.” Every single individual that God determines to save shall be saved. Did you notice that? It is not the will of your Father which is heaven that one

of these little ones should perish. It is impossible for those whom he has chosen to frustrate his will. What a great comfort that is.

Well now, it might be possible however, would it not, for a believer to offend a believer. What shall we do in case a believer offends a believer, in case a believer sins against another believer? And of course, it is possible that that should happen, and, therefore, we should take great care not to treat them as reprobates. There is a special form of discipline that should be carried out, and that seems to be the connection between this section and the preceding. For he says, “Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee.”

What’s the first step? Suppose someone has wronged us. And there’s no question about whether it is or is not, and of course, we should be very careful that it is not really we who have wronged the brother. But let’s assume that it is true that we have been wronged. What should we do?

Well, I think the first thing that we ordinarily do, is after we brooded over it a little while and it has become even worse, because we have allowed ourselves to brood over it. Well after we’ve brooded over it sufficiently, the first thing that we do is to run to the telephone and call our closest Christian friends, and we spill the beans. [Laughter] We are afflicted, as one friend of mine says, with Alexander Graham Bell-itus. [More Laughter] So we get on the telephone and we call them and we talk.

And we gossip. We gossip for a lengthy period of time. And then, as my friend also said, we have the nerve to say, after we have spent an hour gossiping over the phone, to hang up the receiver and then say to other Christian friends, we’ve been having Christian fellowship. Well, that’s the way it usually happens, but that’s not the way it should.

The first step in response to a trespass against a believer is a private conference between the two parties that are involved. If some brother has committed a trespass against you, he should be the first to know it. As the Germans like to say, the discussion is to take place *unterfebraugen*—that is, “under four eyes,” the four eyes of the two people that are involved. So the first response is to go to the brother. That’s the first step. As Paul puts it, “Brethren, if man be overtaken in a fault, ye who

are spiritual restore such an one in the spirit of meekness, considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” So the rebuke is to be a private rebuke. And if you have gained your brother by this, then, of course, that’s the end of it.

Notice, too, that the subject of the little, private conference is the brother’s sin, not what you have suffered by reason of it. Now, it should be private, too, because it’s more likely at that stage to win the brother over. That would seem to be the point that James makes when he says, “Let him know that he who converteth the sinner from his ways shall save a sinner from death”—I take that to be physical death; there is some question about it—“and shall hide a multitude of sins.”

But now, suppose a brother doesn’t respond to our gentle rebuke. Suppose he persists in that which is really a trespass against us. What should we do, then? Go to the telephone again? No, not to the telephone again, except to make a contact or two. And if the private rebuke, then, does not produce repentance, the Lord instructs the offended brother to take one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses, a thing may be established, so that there may be discussion with several involved, in which the matters are discussed, and the witnesses may confirm the judgment of the offended party that the other is at fault.

The rabbis used to say, “Judge not alone, for none may judge alone save one, that is, God.” And so we need witnesses. And, incidentally, he uses a principle from the Old Testament which would seem to indicate, since Paul uses it, too, that there are many sections of the Old Testament that have their application to us. We are not to receive an accusation against an elder except at the hand of two or three witnesses, for example. And so here, we should have two or three witnesses, and seek in the company of several people to get the matter straightened out.

But suppose this doesn’t work. Then what are we to do? Well, our Lord tells us in verse 17, if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church. So, the next step is if the brother who has offended against us does not respond to private admonition and discussion, does not respond to this plural rebuke from several parties, then the matter should be referred to the church.

Now when he says referred to the church, he means the local church, of course, because it would be rather difficult for us to inform the whole invisible, universal church of the sin against us. That’s beyond our capacity. So what he has in mind is the local church.

Now this is the second time that we have had the mention of the term, church, in the Gospel of Matthew, and by the way, as I mentioned when we were discussing chapter 16, these three occurrences (because the word occurs here twice in one verse) of the word, church, are the only occurrences of the word church in all of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. So our Lord is giving instruction which has to do with the church when it comes into existence in the future.

In what sense is the church to be apprised of what has taken place? In a public meeting? Or should it be made known to the elders as representatives of the church, as those who have the oversight in the church? Now, the Lord doesn’t really specify this, and I think that we are then cast upon parallel passages that might tell us something about it, or a reasoning from the standpoint of Scriptural principles.

It is said that when there came difficulty in the church at Antioch, that they went up to Jerusalem to discuss the matter, and after they had discussed the matter, Luke speaks of the judgment that followed on the part of those who rendered the decision in this way, “Then it pleased the apostles and elders (notice the order, incidentally—the apostles and elders) with the whole church to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.” So, it would seem that discipline was a part of discussion of the church in Jerusalem—the question there was, should a man be circumcised in order to be saved—when the decision was rendered, it was rendered in the name of the apostles and elders with the church, which would seem to suggest that the important, the authorities were the apostles and elders and the church went along with them in their decision.

Now, the church should not go along with apostles and elders if they are contrary to the Word of God, but that would seem to be the pattern, that when difficulties arise, and personal counsel does not solve the question, and then taking two or three people does not solve the matter, it should be brought to the attention of the elders. And the elders, acting for the body, should seek to

arrive at the truth of the situation, and then, if there’s no response to the elders in disciplinary discussion, then the elders are to make it known to the whole of the church.

And the church should, as convinced of the justice of the case of the brother and the elders, should identify themselves with the mind of their leaders. In other words, “The authorities,” to use Hendrickson’s words, “took the lead.” So, to tell it to the church, then, probably means that the matter is to be referred to the elders for their consideration.

Well, when the decision is made and is made known publicly to the church, the Lord adds, “Verily I say unto you”—well, I was reading the wrong text, there—“If he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man, or as a Gentile and a tax collector.” So, the penalty is expulsion from assembly privileges.

Now, let me stress this because I think this has been misunderstood. It’s sometimes been thought that when a man comes under biblical discipline and refuses to respond to the elders that he should be excommunicated from the church. That is, the relationship should be severed completely. Now, it is my opinion that that is not really a biblical principle. I do not think that it is true to the teaching of the Word of God, and I do think that it is also theologically questionable.

Now, of course, if the church should have a doctrine that one day you can be a believer in the Lord Jesus and possess everlasting life, and the next day, by virtue of sin, you lose your salvation, then that makes sense to excommunicate from the church when sin has been committed.

But if your doctrine is the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints and eternal security; if it’s true that once you have become a Christian, a genuine Christian, you are always a Christian, then to excommunicate a person from the local church is contradictory. You are saying to the world that they are no longer a member of the church; at the same time you affirm that they are a member of the church. So, excommunication is not really a biblical teaching. Expulsion from assembly privileges, however, is a different matter.

My wife, who was a member of a local church in Birmingham, Alabama that believed in the perseverance of the saints, after liberalism had come into the church, and we were living in Dallas,

she felt that she did not want to be identified with that church any longer because of the liberalism, feeling that by identification with that church, she was participating in the liberal attitude that they had in rejection of biblical truth.

So on one of our visits back to Birmingham—this is many, many years ago; I think I was still a student at the seminary at the time. She called the church office. She had grown up in that church and been baptized as an infant in that church. Her grandfather was an elder in the church. We had been married in the church. We had been members of the church, and she had many, many relatives in the church. But she called the church office and said that she would like to have her name taken off the roll of the church.

The secretary was not used to speaking to people like my wife, I’m sure. [Laughter] And she was a little nonplused, not knowing what to do, because she asked the normal question, well, what church are you joining? “Well, at the moment, I’m not a member of any church. I just don’t want to be a member of this one.” [Laughter] And she said, “Well, we don’t have requests like that. Let me ask the pastor.”

And Mary said afterwards there was a rather lengthy discussion—this went on for a number of minutes—and finally she picked up the phone again and said, “Mrs. Johnson, there are only two ways that we accede to your request to take your name off of the roll, and one is, you have to join another church, or die.” [Boisterous laughter]

And Mary said she really wasn’t counting on doing the latter, but she was not a member of the church. And this was an interesting reply, and I must confess at the time it caused me to think. But as I thought about it, it was the kind of reply that should have been made. Because you see, to remove a name from the roll is to say, in effect, they’re no longer a member of the body of Christ. But they were true believers. So there was something theoretical that lay back of that answer.

It was that once a person is a member of the body of Christ, he is a member, and you cannot eliminate their names from the roll without creating the impression that you may be saved and then lost. Well, then, what does the Lord mean when he says, “Let them be unto thee as a heathen man

and as a publican (or as a tax collector)?” Why, he means in the official relationship of the church, so far as it pertains to the fellowship of the church, he should be like a Gentile and like a publican—not one of them but *like* one of them.

The point is, simply, that he should not be allowed to partake of the Lord’s Supper. That’s the visible expression of the body of Christ. When we are sitting down at the Lord’s Table we are saying to everybody, we are members of this local church and members of the body of Christ. When we take the bread and wine, we are confessing that our salvation is related to the sacrifice that he accomplished at Calvary. And when we say that, and when we do this together, we are acknowledging fellowship with the Lord and fellowship with one another.

Now when a brother is out of fellowship with the Lord, and out of fellowship with the Christians, then he is by virtue of the elder’s action, not allowed to partake of the elements. He is encouraged to attend. He should attend. It may be the means by which he comes under conviction of sin and repentance and restoration. And so when a person comes under discipline, he is not expelled from the church, but he is expelled from the enjoyment of his assembly privileges. So the offender should be treated as a heathen man and as a tax collector.

The apostle says in 2 Thessalonians, “If any man not obey our word by this epistle, note that man and not have any company with him that he may be ashamed. Yet, count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.” And there he speaks in the personal realm, that the brother who has not been officially declared out of fellowship with the assembly, though still a Christian, he on the personal level is to be approached and appealed to by the Christians to repent and to be restored to fellowship.

Does this seem strange to you? The reason it does is not because we don’t sin in the 20th century. It’s because we’re not carrying out discipline. These personal appeals are very important and stress the fact that this relationship of love, one for another, still exists even when we’re out of fellowship with one another because of some wrong that we have done to our brethren.

This question of having the Lord’s Supper and attendance at it as a very important part of our church life, I think was brought home to me many years ago in Charleston, South Carolina. I grew up over there in a church which was one of the oldest Presbyterian churches in the United States. I think they advertise that they are the oldest. And, in the old days, when they observed communion, they did it with long tables, so that in the auditorium a long table would be placed, which would be length of the auditorium. And everyone would sit down at the table in order to have communion.

But in order to get in, you had to have a token. Now, the tokens were given out every month to those that were in right relationship to the church. So every month, you would be issued a token if you were in fellowship with the local church, if you were not under discipline. So, when the communion service took place, you came with your token, and that enabled you to have a seat at the communion table where you ate the bread and drank the wine.

Well, that was a practice that was very, very scriptural. I’m not suggesting, incidentally, that we go back to it in Believers Chapel, but it’s not a bad idea at all, because it lays great stress upon the fact that as individuals, we are to remain in fellowship with one another and with the Lord, and we shouldn’t partake at the Lord’s table if we’re not in fellowship. We eat and drink judgment to ourselves, Paul says, if we do that.

Now, the Baptists used to do that, too, and they used to do that in Texas. They used to have meetings for discipline once a month. Did you know that? Some years ago, I was preaching in East Texas, and a judge from Lufkin came to meetings. We got close over a period of a number of years, and he used to tell me of some of his experiences. He was a very old man, even older than I am, many years ago [laughter]. And he would tell me of the many experiences that he’d had—he’d been a Baptist deacon for many years—and he had many unusual experiences, and a lovely brother.

And he said, “Lewis, you know, we used to have discipline meetings once a month. They usually were held on Saturday afternoon. And the churches were very small, and there was so much intermarriage, that frequently, the matters that were discussed were almost within families. And there

was sometimes hot dispute over who had wronged who. And occasionally they'd say, we'll let's pray about this.”

And so one brother would get up and pray, and he would pray from his vantage point. And he said it became so common for argument to be carried on in prayer [laughter] that an expression arose, “Answer him in pr'yer.” They used to say, answer 'im in pr'yer. And so if one brother got up and prayed along a certain line, giving what someone else thought was a wrong interpretation of an incident, someone one punch someone else and say, “Answer 'im in pr'yer!” And so he would get up and talking to the Lord—but really talking to the other side [more laughter]—would seek to put in a word or two for his viewpoint.

Well now, of course, anything that's good can be misused, and that's what happened in that case. But disciplinary meetings are not all that bad in the light of the New Testament.

Well then, speaking in verse 18, the Lord goes on to say, “Verily I say unto you,”—and that very word, incidentally, verily I say unto you, indicates that he regards discipline as a very solemn matter—“Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Now what does he mean, here?

He cites again the text that he had used back in, or some expressions that he had used back in chapter 16 and verse 19, in which he had said that the local church would be given the authority to legislate. They would have the authority to declare the terms of salvation, and they would have the authority to define proper conduct.

Well that's what he's speaking about here. Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven—whatsoever you shall forbid on earth shall be forbidden in heaven. And whatsoever ye shall loose, or allow, on earth shall be allowed in heaven. He's saying that if you carry out these biblical injunctions that I'm giving you, you have the support of God in heaven. We will stand behind these words if you carry them out, according to the teaching of the Word of God.

And in 1 Corinthians chapter 5—I don't have time to speak of that—there is a beautiful illustration of that procedure. For when that church did not exercise discipline—and they should

have—Paul says, “I did it in the spirit.” You all gathered together in the spirit, in my mind, and I was there, and the Lord was there. And I carried out discipline, under the authority of God, committing that brother to the destruction of the flesh that the spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. And that discipline is being carried out, is the apostle’s intention in that word to them.

Now speaking from the manward side in verse 19, he says, “Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven.” This text, incidentally, is often regarded as a text that has to do with prayer. In other words, if two of you shall get together and agree on some matter, then God is going to have to answer it. That’s nonsense. This text doesn’t have to do with prayer.

We should never go to another brother and say, look, if two of us agree on a point, God’s going to answer it. In the first place, he’s going to do his will. And the second place, if you look at the context, it has to do with church discipline. What’s he’s saying is, if a church carries out church discipline as it should carry it out, the church has the support of God in heaven. And if there’re just a few of you gathered together in a local church, and you agree that this is the matter, this is the case of the matter, that this is the situation, and the right lies here and the wrong lies there, and you agree, and you pronounce judgment—disciplinary judgment in accordance with the Scriptures that I’ve just given you—then you can be sure that your will can be done by my Father in heaven, because it’s his will. Doesn’t have a thing to do with prayer.

And that leads me to the 20th verse, which doesn’t have anything to do with the definition of a local church, either. “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” There are lots of people who think this is the definition of a local church, so let’s get together in the corner of the auditorium on Tuesday night, and we’ll have a little church meeting. No. It’s not a church.

Let’s have a Bible class in our home. Two or three of us get together and meet in the name of the Lord Jesus. We have a church. No, we don’t have a church, then.

This is not a definition of a local church. What is a local church? Why, a local church is a congregation of professing believers who meet regularly in a certain locality. And they not only meet regularly in a certain locality, but they have the oversight of an elder. They have deacons and gifted men. And what do they do? They observance the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and they continue in the apostle’s doctrine. And unless we have these factors, we don’t have a local church.

What does this text have to do with, for where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them? Why, it has to do with a disciplinary meeting of the church. So, where two or three have been gathered together in my name to execute discipline, they have the assurance that there I am in the midst, and that discipline will be carried out by heaven. There am I, in power, in their midst.

So he’s saying that when one brother wrongs another brother, and the procedure is followed, then you can have assurance that God is going to set [the] matter straight. That’s what he’s saying. Very important to read these things in the light of the context.

Now, of course, there are some applications of this last text. Certainly, when we meet on Sunday, we should meet in the name of the Lord Jesus, and we should gather in the sense that we are a gathering unto him. That’s true. But nevertheless, that’s not the essential meeting of it.

Well, it’s time for me to close, but let me just mention, again, the relevance of this teaching for the church today. If we are going to continue in the faith, and if Believers Chapel is to continue as a vital, living, local church, we must contend with the matter of church discipline. We must remember that we are still sinners, and we do wrong one another. Often, it is inadvertent. Often, it is deliberate. And when these matters arise, when we do fail, when we do yield to the weakness of the flesh, it is necessary that biblical discipline be carried out.

Now, the first step, of course, hopefully would be the only step necessary, that between brethren, the matters must be straightened out. But we must remember that ultimately, discipline

must involve the elders and may involve the public naming of the individuals who are out of fellowship with the Lord.

In fact, Ironside has told the story of a man who wanted to hire a coachman. He was a very wealthy man and lived up on a mountain, and there was a very precipitous road up to his place, and he had a team of horses, and he wanted someone to be his chauffeur. So, he was interviewing candidates.

And one of them he interviewed, he asked the question, “Tell me, are you adept at handling fractious horses?” The man said yes. He said, “Can you drive a six-horse team?” He said yes. “How near can you drive to the edge of the cliff can you drive without going over?”

He said, “Well, I can drive within a foot of the cliff and not go over.”

He said, “Go in the next room. I have others to interview.”

And so, another man was asked the question. He said, “How close to the edge can you come?”

He said, “Why, I can drive on the very edge of that precipice and not go over.”

He said go into the next room. The last man he asked the same question.

The man said, “If you want a fellow to drive on the edge of a precipice, you don’t want me. I stay away from it as far as I possibly can when I drive a six-horse team.”

He said, “You are the man I want.” [Laughter]

Dr. Ironside used to add, that precipice is both a moral and doctrinal one, and Christians should be careful of the edge of the precipice.

And let’s never forget, too, that all discipline is ultimately designed to restorative. We should never forget that. Discipline is not designed to cast the brother out, to make the brother feel bad. Discipline is not designed to bring him under discipline as the final aim and goal of it.

Discipline is designed in the hand of God to lead to repentance and restoration, because it is the desire of God that a person who has sinned against another brother be restored, be restored to fellowship, that the testimony of the local church may continue to abound and grow. Restoration is

the aim, so discipline is God’s loving way of bringing correction to us, just like a father a child. What kind of man is a true father who never disciplines his children? I don’t want to be around those children.

But let me see a man who has disciplined his children well, and their children are lovely companions. The grace of God manifested upon a child who has grown up in family discipline is a really telling thing. And the same thing holds true in the spiritual life. Discipline should lead to, ultimately, growth in spiritual life.

Well, I’ve had to speak to the saints this morning, but if you’re here this morning, and you do not know the Lord Jesus as your Savior, we remind you that he has offered an atoning sacrifice for sinners. And it is possible for you, if the Holy Spirit has brought conviction of your sin, to come to the Lord Jesus and receive the forgiveness of sins that is freely offered to those who sense their need.

It is our prayer, it is the prayer of the Christians in the auditorium that you respond to the good news and believe in our Lord Jesus Christ that you may be saved. May God help you to make that decision. Then you come into the family of God, and there are subject to the loving discipline of the heavenly Father, that is designed to bring us to full maturity, so that when we enter his heavenly home, we are the kind of children that will bring honor and glory to him. Let’s stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for these passages from the Word of God that speak to us of the need of family discipline. We all, Lord, are little children in the faith, and we need a Father who loves us enough to discipline us. And we thank Thee that Thou dost love us enough to discipline us. And we do praise Thee for the experiences of life that enable us to grow.

O God, exercise Thy discipline in our midst, for purposes of restoration and Christian testimony and growth.

May grace, mercy and peace go with us.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.