

September 5, 2021

Introduce

Good morning, Fathom. If we haven't met, my name is Eric Shelly and I'm one of the elders here at the church. Happy Labor Day weekend!

Labor Day is a unique holiday

- it doesn't honor any specific person or remember a certain event
- Its basically a holiday to celebrate and pay tribute to those who work – to American workers.
- So, if you have a job or had a job at one point in your life... Labor Day is to honor you. So, enjoy the holiday on Monday!
- We're glad you're spending part of your Labor Day weekend with us
- Hello to those streaming online also – it's good to have you with as us well
- Please pray with me as we get started

INTRO

So, this morning, we're going to continue our sermon mini-series about church discipline. If you were here last week, Chris Martin preached the first part of the series, teaching out of Matthew 18

- One of his main points was that discipleship is done out of relationships
- And that the majority of church discipline will and should take place in one-on-one relationships
 - It's my brother or sister in Christ, confronting sin in my life
 - It's me going to someone I have a relationship with and addressing sin in their life
- That's how most church discipline should take place. If your brother sins, tell him his fault – you and you alone
- And if he's not receptive to you telling him his sin, then you do it with 2-3 other people
- And if that doesn't work, tell it to the church

This morning, we're going to talk a bit more about the 'tell it to the church' part.

This sermon is intended to build on Chris' sermon from last week, so if you weren't here last week, go back and listen to that sermon. Both sermons are intended to go together. Make sure you listen to them both.

Surprisingly, there aren't a lot of resources, or study material on church discipline.

- So, I leaned fairly heavily on material from a guy named Jonathan Leeman
- He's a writer for 9Marks and an elder at a Baptist church in Maryland
- So, I'm grateful to him for his insight.

Intro: Discipline

When you hear *discipline*, what do you think of? What comes to mind?

- Maybe it's how your parents disciplined – or didn't discipline – you when you were young
- Maybe it's how you're working through disciplining your children currently
- Maybe you hear discipline and you think *punishment*
- Maybe you hear discipline and you think *practice* or *rules*
- The word *discipline* likely strikes us all a bit differently and means something a bit different to each of us

I think most of us *like the idea of* discipline, or *would like to say that* we are disciplined, but if we did a comparison, we'd see that we have different approaches to discipline

For example, I think most of us would say that it's important to be disciplined when it comes to nutrition and exercise...

- I think a lot of us would agree that discipline is key to losing weight or gaining muscle or getting into better cardiovascular shape, right?
- But when dessert is served, do we maintain that discipline?
- Or when the alarm clock goes off at 5:30am for that morning workout... do we have the discipline to get up?

So, while I think most of us can agree that discipline is important. But when it actually comes time to practice discipline, or to be disciplined... our mindset changes some.

- Suddenly, it doesn't seem quite as important. Or urgent
- The idea of getting into better shape seems great, until it's time to make some sacrifices in your diet
- Giving your child consequences to teach them seems like a good thing to do, until you actually need to punish them
- It's because discipline is hard
- Being disciplined and applying discipline – these are hard

I've read that one of the best things parents can do when it comes to discipline

- Is to have thought about, determined, or agreed upon

- What types of disobedient actions from their child...
- ...will generate what types of discipline
- Having thought through and talked through this in advance ...
- ...gives parents a gameplan and helps them to be consistent when they need to discipline

So, when my wife, Anne and I became parents, we started having these conversations. We still have these conversations in fact.

Because believe it or not, those two beautiful, cute, innocent-looking daughters of ours – who you've probably seen running around church – are little sinners.

They misbehave. We need to discipline them at times

- And so, Anne and I agreed that certain behaviors would be disciplined through spankings
 - So, we discussed how and when we would spank
 - And who would do it
 - Things we would say to the girls before and after the spanking
- Then we agreed that other behaviors would be disciplined differently
- If the girls lied to us, this would be the consequence
- If the girls hit each other, we had a consequence for that
- If they disobeyed, here is how we'd handle it
- If our oldest daughter tied up our youngest daughter and then tied her to a shelf in her room... we had a consequence for that
 - *Ok, we didn't really have a consequence for that one...*
 - *It actually happened... but it never crossed our mind to gameplan for that!*
 - But that's kind of the point... even though we didn't talk about or plan for every scenario,
 - simply by talking about discipline ahead of time,
 - it helped us to be prepared and on the same page when things came up

This spring and summer, Fathom's elders did something similar. We spent lots of time working through Fathom's process of church discipline so that we have a better plan in place for the next time we need it

Jonathan Leeman said "*We must work on the things of the church when we're not in the crisis of those things, to make us ready for what may come*"

So that's what we did this summer. We developed Fathom's church discipline process

- It's not a one size fits all approach

- And we didn't go through every conceivable sin or situation and document an approach to it
- But a lot of our conversation was around process and guidelines:
 - How do we as elders assess a situation?
 - What are the questions we should ask?
 - What are the steps we should take?
 - Who should we involve – and not involve – in the process?

Part of the process of discipline and part of the process of *working on the things of the church* is that it's not just limited to something the elders do

- It's something we as a church body should also talk about together
- Just like parents should discuss discipline ahead of time, before they need to discipline...
- A church body should talk about discipline ahead of time as well
 - The goal is for all of us to understand...
 - A biblical basis for church discipline
 - Because church discipline is not just something the elders do
 - It's something the entire church family should do
 - And it's something the entire church family should understand

So today, I want to not only explain *why* church discipline is important, but also *what* it is, *who* it is for, and finally, *how* it will be done here at Fathom.

So, *What, Why, Who, and How*. Those are the questions we're going to answer today. We're going to use a passage in Hebrews 12 to help us answer these questions.

- So, turn in your Bibles to Hebrews 12 verse 5.
- There are Bibles available under every seat if you need one. Hebrews 12 is on page 1,009 in the Bibles beneath the seats
- If you're streaming online, you can click on the Bible link and get there
- If you're using your own bible or a Bible app, that's fine also... we just want everyone to put their own eyes on the text and read it for yourself
- We use the English Standard Version... the ESV

Turn to Hebrews 12:5. Let's start with the **What**

What Is Church Discipline?

What is church discipline?

As I mentioned at the start, too often,

- I think we hear *discipline* and we think *punishment or consequences*
- We hear *church discipline* and we think *excommunication*
- We hear *excommunication* and we think *kicked out of the church*

But excommunication really isn't kicking someone out of the church. Nor is it church discipline

- It is certainly a part of church discipline,
- but it's not the full picture
- We'll talk about excommunication and what it means shortly...

When I'm talking about *What church discipline is*, here's what I mean:

Church discipline is the process by which the church, addresses sin in a member's life

More succinctly, church discipline is:

- A loving process to address sin, (what)

That's the what. A process, based in love, to address sin.

Let's look at Hebrews 12:5-6, where we read in the second half of verse 5: "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

- Whether you're 4-years-old or 40-years-old
- Sometimes it's hard to see discipline as loving
- But as Chris explained last week and as the Bible makes clear throughout both the Old and New Testaments... discipline is a loving act
- So, first, Discipline is done out of love
- Whether we're talking about church discipline or disciplining a child, if it's not done out of love, it's not being done correctly

Second, discipline is a **process**. Go to verse 11:

¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Notice the phrase at the end of the verse: to those who have been trained by it. What this is saying is that

- Church discipline is not just a consequence or punishment for sin
- But it is something you're trained in
- It is a **process**... an experience...
- It is training for holiness and righteousness

- A progression
- A development

Illustration: Athletes

Just like a pro football player doesn't simply suit up and play the game, discipline isn't a one-time event. It's a process.

- A football player works out year-round
- They have minicamps, training camps, preseason games, film meetings, coaching...
- All the time, they are training
- Disciplining their bodies and minds
- Training is a process. So is discipline

Last week, Chris explained that there are 2 types of discipline.

- Some discipline is **formative**, while other discipline is **reformatory** or **corrective**
- Jon Leeman describes the two forms of discipline in this way:
“Formative discipline helps to form the disciple through instruction. Corrective discipline helps to correct the disciple through correcting sin.”

Just like formative discipline, corrective discipline can take multiple forms:

- It could start with a conversation about sin
- It could be putting accountability measures into place
- Or it could be recommending counselling
- Or facilitating discussions with the parties involved
- Or, when necessary, excommunicating

Corrective discipline or correcting sin, is the harder of the two types of discipline. And correcting sin is the third part of the *what* of church discipline

So, **Church discipline is a loving process, to address sin.**

I've mentioned *excommunication* twice now, so let me explain it more fully.

Excommunication: Explain

I think that often, we hear this kind of Catholic sounding term “excommunication” and we think “kicked out of the church”. That's not a completely accurate definition

- **Excommunicating is really “ex--communion--ing”**
- That is – it's removing someone from communion with the church body

- In 1 Corinthians 5:4, Paul tells the church in Corinth to remove an unrepentant church member
- Excommunication then, **is a temporary separation, designed to ultimately bring about repentance of sin**
- Excommunication is not forbidding someone from coming to church – I'll repeat something Chris said last week:
 - Church is the best place for someone caught up in sin to be!
 - There may be times where forbidding someone from coming to church is appropriate, if someone's safety is at risk, but that is not the norm
 - We want people under church discipline to still be in church
- But excommunication is a removal – it is public exclusion from the fellowship of the local church
 - A Fathom Covenant Member confronted with outward and significant sin – who is unrepentant of that sin – will be excluded from communion with the church
 - Because, at that point, Fathom will no longer be able to affirm that they are living as Christians
 - And so, if we cannot affirm that they are living as a Christian,
 - Then we must also refuse them communion
 - We say it each week... if you don't consider yourself a Christian... if you haven't accepted Christ as your savior...
 - Then we ask you to abstain from communion
 - Because the Lord's Supper, or communion, is for believers
 - We would also revoke the covenant membership of a member under excommunication
 - ...until the Lord brings about repentance in their hearts and until they can be restored
- Excommunication is a last resort
 - it's a last and final option of church discipline
- But it is an option – it is one of the tools in the church discipline toolbox
 - It is the elder's desire to see every person who is confronted with sin turn from their sin in repentance
 - But, if they refuse, if they're unrepentant, if they willingly continue to live in their sin
 - Then the elders must act through discipline and excommunication
 - This is out of love for the disciple, and out of love for the church we are leading

- Excommunication is intended to be temporary... until Christ brings about repentance in their hearts
- So, when necessary, Fathom will practice excommunication as part of church discipline
- Excommunication is a part or a slice of church discipline.

But the full what, of church discipline is that it is: SLIDE

- A loving process to address sin,

Let's move on to the *Why*

Why Church Discipline?

Why church discipline? *Why* is church discipline important?

- Is church discipline just to help us as church elders and staff keep the sheep in line?
- Is it so as church attenders, you know the expectations of you if you want to be a part of Fathom?
- Is church discipline just the rules or the guardrails you need to stay inside of if you want to be a member our church?

I think the *why* behind church discipline is much more than a set of rules or guidelines

The Bible makes clear that discipline is for our good, our growth, and our sanctification – both us individually as disciples, and overall, as a church

Let's turn again to Hebrews 12:10-15. Let's read these together. Verse 10:

¹⁰ For they [speaking about our earthly fathers] disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he [God] disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. ¹² Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. ¹⁴ Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled

Listen to the phrases used in these verses:

- share his holiness
- yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness
- lift your drooping hands
- strengthen your weak knees,
- make straight paths for your feet,

- so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed
- Strive for peace with everyone,
- See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God
- that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble

The writer of Hebrews is painting a picture of **growth, of health, of life, and of truth** in a Christian

- A Christian or a disciple is to be growing in holiness
- In righteousness
- In strength
- Striving for peace

Our job as Christians and as disciples is to proclaim Jesus Christ to the world around us

- We do this verbally, but also – and maybe more importantly – we do this in how we live our lives
- And so, sin in our lives prevents or harms that proclamation
- Our sin hurts our witness to the world
- And conversely, our growth as Christians and as disciples can enhance our proclamation

This growth is what we mean when we talk about discipleship

- A disciple is someone seeking to follow Jesus more closely each day
- Jonathan Leeman says *“To be disciplined is to be disciplined”*

And so, discipline is part of discipleship. We discipline as part of our discipleship process.

We discipline as a way to make disciples that are healthy, that are growing, that are holy, that are righteous.

Someone who is striving to follow Jesus as a disciple may need discipline from time to time to follow Jesus more closely

- The church’s job is to point the disciple towards Jesus
- To help to steer them in where they should go
- The writer of Hebrews says we – as the church – are to “**stir up one another to love and good works**” (Heb 10:24)
- To provide both formative discipline and corrective discipline

Too often, people come to church seeking only the formative discipline.

- They want instruction
- They want to hear good preaching or teaching that can help them

- To be a better parent
- To have a happier marriage
- To have success at work or in life
- To be a better person
- But they don't realize that correction is just as important as instruction

Illustration: Football

So again, to use football as an illustration:

- Suppose a coach draws up a play
 - It's there in the playbook for the players to study and learn
 - And they've gone over it in team meetings
 - They've practiced the play
 - And the offensive lineman, the receivers, running backs, and quarterback all know what they're supposed to do in the play
- But let's say that one of the receivers runs the wrong pattern
- They aren't where they're supposed to be... they aren't where the quarterback is expecting them to be
- The play will most likely fail
- A good coach needs to address that mistake by the receiver
- It's not enough to just teach the play and then do nothing else. A good coach will also correct mistakes that are made
 - Maybe the coach verbally addresses it... pointing out the receiver's error... ensuring the receiver knows what they did wrong
 - Maybe the coach pulls the receiver out of the game for a few plays and discusses it... correcting the error
 - Maybe the coach benches the player for a time so he can watch others run the play correctly
 - Coaches may correct a player's mistakes in many ways
- But the important thing is that they address and correct the mistakes
- A coach that only instructs how to run the play
- But doesn't correct errors in running the play
- Isn't a good coach

Because correcting a player's error helps the player to learn and grow. To get better

- It will teach them so they can run the right play the next time
- It will make them better players
- Which will help the team as a whole

The same is true with a church.

- Lots of churches have good teaching
- Or good programming
- Or good men's and women's bible studies
- They're really good at formative discipline... they can teach people how to run the play
- But will they carry out corrective discipline? Will they stir up one another?
- Will they correct the disciple when they do wrong? That's the hard part
- In coaching or discipleship, corrective discipline is always going to be the hard part

Just like a good coach, a good church will not only provide formative discipline and teaching, but it will provide corrective discipline.

Fathom desires to be a church that will not only provide solid teaching and preaching, but also will also correct sin when needed

- Because we realize that both are necessary to help disciples be more like Jesus
- Both are necessary to see disciples develop in **growth, health, life, and truth**

So, to continue our definition, **SLIDE** Church discipline is:

- A loving process to address sin, (that's the what)
- And bring growth, health, life, and truth, (that's the why)

Who Can Discipline and Be Disciplined?

The last part of this definition of church discipline is the *Who*

And *who* can be disciplined? *Who* can carry out church discipline?

I'm going to answer the second question first. Who can carry out the discipline? Who has the authority to conduct church discipline?

The broad answer, quite simply, is the church. **The local church**. In our case, Fathom Church.

The local church isn't a Bible study or a discipleship group

- It isn't a prayer group
- Or an accountability group
- It isn't a group of Christian friends gathering together to worship
- Those are all good things... but they aren't the local church

The local church isn't a denomination or a network either

- Acts 29 Network
- Or the Southern Baptist Convention
- Or any church denomination... aren't the local church either

The local church is a group of people who

- Meet officially and meet regularly
- And basically say to one another, "You're a Christian. You belong to Christ's Kingdom and his church."
- And then they affirm and they oversee each person's status as a Christian through teaching and preaching of the Word
- ...and through ordinances like the Lord's Supper, and baptisms

The local church carrying out church discipline is the picture that is painted for us throughout the book of Acts and the New Testament.

But even before the book of Acts, it was Jesus who established the local church.

In Matthew 16, for the first time in the NT¹, Jesus uses the Greek word for church, *ekklesia*.

- He's talking to his disciples and he tells them "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven"
- and then He gives them permission to forbid and permit in the church,
- the things that are forbidden and permitted in heaven²

So, the local church is given authority – from Jesus – in our lives.

- The church has authority to say what is right or wrong in our lives
- The church has authority to say what things are permitted and what things are forbidden
- The church has authority to say what things are sinful

These aren't popular statements in our society,

- Our culture is more comfortable with ideas like 'you do you'
- or 'find your truth'
- or 'live in your truth'
- or 'do what's best for you'

¹ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). [*The Bible exposition commentary*](#) (Vol. 1, p. 59). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

² Wiersbe, W. W. (1992). [*Wiersbe's expository outlines on the New Testament*](#) (pp. 63–64). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

The idea that someone or something else has authority to speak truth into your life is not popular. But Jesus stated that the church has that authority.

So, if the church has authority to practice church discipline, then *who is the church?*

- This is where church membership becomes important
- If you've been to a Pastor's Coffee or even one of our Covenant Membership classes...
- You've likely heard Chris or an elder say that, at Fathom "we hold a very high view of church membership"
- That is to say that we think church membership is very important
 - Important both to the church
 - But also important to the individual... to the member

By the way, if you are interested in membership here at Fathom, our next membership classes will be coming up in October... so be on the lookout for that.

It's through our membership that Fathom is able to identify who has submitted themselves to the church's authority

- Fathom's Covenant Members are those of you who have said, "We are in"...
- "We will submit to Fathom Church's authority in our lives"
- "We will submit to Fathom's authority to affirm us as believers
- and to disciple us as we seek to follow Jesus"

And in return, Fathom Church declares:

- That this person, in our eyes, is a Christian – they have repented and believed and so we affirm their status as disciples of Christ
- We take responsibility for them, for their growth, to shepherd them, to disciple them, to care for and pastor them
- ... and if and when necessary, to discipline them
- In fact, the church, and specifically the elders...
 - Will ultimately be held responsible for discipling and disciplining our members
 - Hebrews 13:17 states that the elders, as leaders of the church, 'will need to give an account for the souls of those they lead'

This is why as part of our membership process

- We have interviews
- The elders or staff will meet with those wanting to become members
- We want to ensure that they are repentant believers

- And that they've been baptized
- Because we need to be able to affirm and declare that they are Christians

And it's why on Membership Sunday, the new members stand up front

- And the existing members affirm them
- And together, the new and existing members of Fathom Church covenant to walk together

Here is the **Who** of church discipline: It is the local church who can discipline, and members of the church who can be disciplined.

Here's what this means:

- We are not in the business of disciplining non-members
- Only the Covenant Members of Fathom,
 - who have willingly put themselves under the authority of Fathom,
 - will be disciplined by Fathom
- And so, while we love and appreciate each person who walks down the hall on a Sunday,
 - From the first-time visitors
 - To the regular attenders...
 - It's the Covenant Members that Fathom will ultimately be held responsible to provide discipline for

Illustration: Discipline Your Own Kids

I talked earlier about Anne and I disciplining our daughters.

- If our girls disobey and do something we've forbidden, there are specific actions or consequences that we'll take
- Sometimes we may give spankings for certain actions
- But that doesn't mean I'm going to spank your kids if your kids misbehave or disobey
- Your kids aren't mine – I don't have that authority to discipline them like you do

Church discipline is the same way.

- Just like parents only have authority to discipline their own kids,
- the church only has authority to discipline its own members.
- And the church doesn't have authority to discipline those who have not submitted themselves to the church

To complete our definition, **SLIDE** Church discipline is:

- A loving process to address sin,
- and bring growth, health, life, and truth,
- Into the life of a church member

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How Does Fathom Practice Church Discipline?

So, that was the *What, Why, and Who* of church discipline.

But now I'd like to more practically discuss the *How* behind discipline at Fathom

As I mentioned at the start, the Elders spent a lot of time this spring working through and refining our approach

- Our work didn't result in a step-by-step process to church discipline,
- Because each situation is different and may warrant a different approach
- Each person is different and may need to be disciplined differently

But we've formed a set of guidelines and principles to operate with. These are very high-level.

- But they're intended to be high-level
- These are the overall principles we'll use and apply to each and every situation...
- even though each and every situation will be different

The first step is that we'll want to ensure – before the elders even get involved – that **The church INITIATES the discipline process** **SLIDE**

- This is why Chris taught on Matthew 18 last week
- Discipline should start with someone going to their brother or sister individually to talk about their sin
- Hebrews 3:13 says **But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin**
- So, before it is something the elders address, we want to know that church members started addressing it together individually, first

But as Jesus points out in Matthew 18, there will be times where things are escalated and its necessary to involve others – and at some point, the elders may get involved

The elders' next step is to **communicate INTENTIONS** to the parties involved **SLIDE**

- If someone is accused of sin, we want them to know that our foremost goal and objective is for repentance, reconciliation, and growth
- We want them to know that we're acting out of love for them and that we want to see an end to sin, and see their growth and health through this

- The elders and the church have *every intention* of seeing every act of discipline ultimately result in repentance and restoration
- That's the intention: repentance
- That's why we discipline: to bring about repentance of sin

The elders' next step is to **INVESTIGATE the issue** **SLIDE**

- We'll give every member the benefit of the doubt here, asking
- Is the issue real and credible?
- Is the accusation of sin accurate?
- Do we understand the full picture and full situation?
- Do we understand the person's background, spiritual maturity, the relationships involved?
- We'll strive to move at an appropriate pace to allow us to carefully consider the entire issue, to prayerfully and wisely investigate the full picture

If the elders find that formal discipline is needed, then the last step is to **INTRODUCE a discipline plan** **SLIDE**

- The plan will be designed to produce
 - evidence of genuine repentance,
 - correction of the issue in the disciple's life,
 - a true turning away from the sin,
 - and a sincere turning towards holiness.
- The plan will include steps towards restoration
- The plan will likely consist of both
 - formative steps
 - and reformative or corrective steps
- A good discipline plan will be appropriate for the impact of the sin, asking
 - Is this an issue that can be addressed privately?
 - Can the elders address the sin with the sinner and lead them towards repentance?
 - Or is this a sin that deserves formal and public discipline?
 - In other words, does this issue deserve excommunication? **BLANK SLIDE**
- Fathom doesn't have a specific list of sins we will and won't address
 - Paul does provide some lists in some of his letters
 - For example, in 1 Corinthians 5, he lists:

- Sexual immorality, greed, being an idolater, reviler, drunkard, swindler all as sins deserving of discipline
 - But this list certainly isn't all-inclusive – there are many other sins we could add to it, that would lead to discipline
 - Paul's list is meant to be indicative of the types of sin that may lead to church discipline³,
- But, in absence of a list, generally, there are three traits of a sin⁴ that will make it deserving of excommunication
 - A sin must be **outward** – it can't be something that is internal only
 - An outward sin can be seen or heard or observed
 - There is visual evidence of an outward sin
 - A sin must also be **significant** for it to be disciplined formally and publicly
 - This is certainly subjective – which sins are big enough that we will discipline them?
 - They are sins – again, unrepentant and persistent sins – that make it difficult to believe that someone living in that sin, is a Christian
 - Finally – and most importantly – a sin must be **unrepentant** for it to be disciplined formally and publicly
 - If the person refuses to repent of their sin – refuses to turn away from it – then it is an issue worthy of formal and public discipline

Illustrations/Examples

Here are a few examples to hopefully clarify:

- Some sins are heart issues – anxiety, worry, envy, greed, or pride
 - These may be significant issues and sins
 - But they aren't outward sins...
 - and so, they won't be disciplined publicly
- However, something like physical abuse or infidelity or substance abuse...
 - these types of things are outward and public
 - And they are significant
 - And so, they may be disciplined publicly
- Now, suppose you hear me talking to someone in the hall one Sunday, and I'm telling them about a recent fishing trip I went on

³ Leeman article: <https://www.9marks.org/article/when-do-you-practice-church-discipline-and-how-do-you-do-it/>

⁴ Example from Leeman article: <https://www.9marks.org/article/when-do-you-practice-church-discipline-and-how-do-you-do-it/>

- And I'm completely embellishing my story⁵ – which by the way, is something all fishermen do
- I'm grossly exaggerating how many fish I caught, how big they were,
- I'm lying about everything
- Now, you know I'm lying about it... and so you confront me
- But when you confront me about it, I deny it
- I entirely refuse to acknowledge that I'm lying
- I would probably be guilty of sin
- But is this lying and embellishment a sin worthy of public and formal discipline?
 - Probably not
 - This is an outward and unrepentant sin
 - But it's not a significant one
- Now, suppose someone is cheating on their spouse, and they are confronted with it – something both outward and significant
 - If they are willing to stop
 - If they acknowledge the sin in what they've done
 - If they are repentant
 - Turning away from what they've done
 - Seeking restoration and forgiveness from their spouse
 - Then any discipline approach from the church would support that repentance and restoration process
 - And would not be public or formal
- BUT, in that same example I just gave... someone is cheating on their spouse,
 - Suppose that they refuse to stop
 - and refuse to repent
 - or even acknowledge that it is wrong
 - Here is an outward, significant, and unrepentant sin
 - So, can we as elders, can we as a church, stand before God and the watching world,
 - ...and still acknowledge that this person engaging in that ongoing sin, is reflecting Christ in their life?
 - I would have a hard time doing so

⁵ Example from Leeman article: <https://www.9marks.org/article/when-do-you-practice-church-discipline-and-how-do-you-do-it/>

- Formal and public discipline... excommunication may be necessary in this situation

Excommunication – again, the final step in a long process of discipline

- Would involve an announced suspension of the member's participation in the membership of the church and in the Lord's Supper
- A path towards repentance and reconciliation and restoration would be laid out... but excommunication would take place until that path is followed

I know these types of determinations are very subjective...

- Its why we as elders pray for wisdom
- It's why you should pray for your elders!
- This stuff isn't easy. As I said from the start, discipline is hard

So to recap Fathom's process – Here is how we will approach church discipline: **SLIDE**

- **The church INITIATES the discipline process**
- The Elders **communicate INTENTIONS**
- The Elders **INVESTIGATE the issue**
- The Elders **INTRODUCE a discipline plan**

That's the process we'll use. That's how we'll approach discipline **BLANK SLIDE**

Conclusion: Our Story

At the end of last week's sermon, Chris shared his story with you. Well, this week I'm going to share my story... which is also Chris's story... which is also Fathom's story

In February of 2019, it was brought to my attention by several people at the church, that Chris was potentially plagiarizing other pastor's sermons.

- At the time, we were holding elder meetings on Monday nights... this was brought to my attention earlier on a Monday
- So, I did some initial research to confirm this accusation was accurate, and brought it to the attention of the other the elders
- That night, at our elder meeting we asked Chris about the accusation – we confronted him
- We said “hey, this was brought to our attention... we did some research and it appears to be a valid claim... is it accurate?”
- And I don't remember Chris' exact words that night, I clearly remember Chris' posture. He essentially said, “yeah, its accurate. I've been doing that and it's not something I'm proud of.”

- When confronted with sin, from the outset, Chris demonstrated a repentant heart
- He apologized to the elders that night
- He apologized to the church later that week
- And that posture – from the first night on
- Really set the course for the process that followed

Because of the public nature of Chris' sin

- And the significance of his role as lead pastor
- We as elders decided that a formal and public discipline process was needed
- We wanted to assess Chris' posture... and his heart... over a period of time
- But we also wanted him to repent and reconcile with folks
- And do some counselling
- And address the issues that led to his dryness and burnout
- We wanted Chris to get healthy again

And from that night in February and for the months that followed, we were able to observe Chris. And continually, we saw a repentant heart and a humble posture

- a turning away from what he'd done
- and a turning toward health and growth

Chris went through a rigorous process of both corrective and reformatory discipline:

- A 10-month process
- Counseling
- Lots of meeting with the elders
- Lots of meetings with church members
 - Asking forgiveness
 - But also receiving forgiveness

Now, I wish I could say that this this was a textbook definition of how to carry out church discipline

- I wish I could say that both Fathom Church and its elders
- Addressed this issue of sin
- In a manner that was 100% by-the-book, smooth, easy, and graceful

But it wasn't

- It was hard. Like I said from the start, discipline is always going to be hard
- We made some mistakes – there are things I would definitely do differently next time around
- It wasn't a smooth, seamless, easy process
- Chris and I had some hard conversations that challenged our relationship at times
- People in the church got angry at how it was handled
- Some thought the elders were too hard on Chris
- Some thought the elders were too easy on him
- Some people left the church
- Again, it was hard
- 2019 was a hard year for me. And for Chris Martin. And for Fathom Church

But here's the thing:

- I am better for having gone through 2019
 - I'm a better elder because of it
 - I've grown in my own discipleship for having gone through it
 - And I'm a healthier, stronger person for it
- Chris Martin is better for it
 - He's addressed the dryness and burnout that led him to his sin
 - He's surrounded himself with more ongoing accountability and support
 - He's learning from his past mistakes, tendencies, and temptations
- Fathom Church is better for it
 - Our lead pastor has grown
 - Our elder board is stronger and more experienced
 - Our staff is humble and healthier
 - We've learned more about church discipline and are even better prepared for the next situation
 - And, we're more convinced that church discipline is important and necessary in the life of a disciple

Fathom Church's first real taste of church discipline...

- The first time the elders of Fathom Church had to formally and publicly discipline a member of Fathom Church,
- It involved the lead pastor
- Of a small, young, church plant

- In a sin that occurred from the pulpit
- It resulted in lots of upheaval at Fathom
 - Members left
 - People stopped coming
 - Staff turmoil
 - Elders were exhausted
- It looked like a disaster that a 5-year-old church probably wouldn't withstand
- After all, 15,000-person mega-churches have folded under situations involving discipline to the lead pastor

But the mystery of God is this:

- He spared our little church. Where many churches our size and in our situation would have crumbled. He brought Fathom through
- And he's building us up again
- Growing us into a healthier church,
- Where life and truth are present
- Where people are being disciplined

I think 2019 was a season of God disciplining Fathom Church

- But I'm convinced that God disciplined us out of love
- To grow us
- So, we might be healthier,
- And so that we might share in His holiness

God disciplines those he loves, so that we might walk closer to Him, be more like His son Jesus, and share in his holiness

And that's why we practice church discipline.

That's why we should want to be part of a church that practices church discipline...

So that we might share in God's holiness.

Let's pray.

RESPONSES:

Well, every week at Fathom we respond in 4 ways:

The **first** is Communion –The crackers and juice represent Christ's body broken and his blood shed on the cross for those who proclaim Christ as Lord and Savior.

- I talked about this earlier, but communion – celebrating the Lord’s Supper
- Is a way for those who proclaim that Jesus is their savior, to remember Christ’s work of salvation on the cross
- We’d ask that if you don’t consider yourself a Christian – if you haven’t accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior...
- That you abstain from communion
- Again, communion is something for believers to celebrate together... it’s a way we can proclaim Christ and what he’s done in our lives
- If you didn’t grab your cracker and juice when you came into the chapel, you can go get it now and we’ll take communion together shortly

The **second** way we respond is by Giving – We believe in giving to God our tithes and offerings – our first and our best – because in Jesus, God gave us His first and His best.

- If you’re a guest with us this morning, please don’t feel any compulsion to give
- We’re so glad you’re here, but we don’t expect you to give to the church... please just be our guest today
- Giving is for Fathom’s members and those who call Fathom their home church
- If you do call Fathom your home church, then you’re invited to give as your heart leads you
- You can use the giving boxes in the back of the room or give online at **fathomchurch.org/give**

The **third** way we respond is through Prayer – Right now if you’re in need of prayer or would like someone to pray for you, I’ll be in the back of the room, some of the elders will be back there as well and we’d love to come alongside of you and pray for any request you might have

The **fourth** response is Singing – Singing moves what we’ve heard in God’s Word from our heads to our hearts. It helps to reinforce God’s truth in our hearts

So, I’m going to read the Words of Institution from the Apostle Paul, we’ll take communion, and then we’ll sing:

1 CORINTHIANS 11:23–26 –WORDS OF INSTITUTION

²³For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” **TAKE**

²⁵In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” **TAKE**

²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Thanks church. Let's continue to worship together.