



**GUARDING
ONE
ANOTHER:
CHURCH
DISCIPLINE**



Guarding One Another: Church Discipline

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INTRODUCTION

What does the local church mean to you?

Maybe you love your church. You love the people. You love the preaching, the singing. You can't wait to show up on Sunday, and you cherish fellowship with other church members throughout the week.

Maybe the church is just a place you show up to a couple times a month. You sneak in late, duck out early.

We at 9Marks are convinced that the local church is God's plan for displaying his glory to the nations. And we want to help you catch and live out that vision, together with your whole church.

The 9Marks Healthy Church Study Guides are a series of six- or seven-week studies on each of the "nine marks of a healthy church" plus one introductory study. These nine marks are the core convictions of our ministry. To provide a quick introduction to them, we've included a chapter from Mark Dever's book *What Is a Healthy Church?* with each study. We don't claim that these nine marks are the most important things about the church or the only important things about the church. But we do believe that they are biblical and therefore are helpful for churches.

So, in these studies, we're going to work through the biblical foundations and practical applications of each one. The ten studies are:

- *Built upon the Rock: The Church* (the introductory study)
- *Hearing God's Word: Expositional Preaching*
- *The Whole Truth about God: Biblical Theology*
- *God's Good News: The Gospel*
- *Real Change: Conversion*
- *Reaching the Lost: Evangelism*
- *Committing to One Another: Church Membership*

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- *Guarding One Another: Church Discipline*
- *Growing One Another: Discipleship in the Church*
- *Leading One Another: Church Leadership*

Each session of these studies takes a close look at one or more passages of Scripture and considers how it applies to the life of the whole church. So, we hope that these studies are equally appropriate for Sunday school, small groups, and other contexts where a group of anywhere from two to two-hundred people can come together and discuss God's Word.

These studies are mainly driven by observation, interpretation, and application questions, so get ready to speak up! We also hope that these studies provide opportunities for people to reflect together on their experiences in the church, whatever those experiences may be.

If you want to be physically healthy, you need rest, a good diet, and regular exercise. You may need to cultivate some good habits and cut off some bad ones.

If you want to learn a foreign language you have to memorize vocabulary and verb forms and practice speaking it until it feels like your head is going to fall off. And you also have to be willing to constantly receive correction to bring your pronunciation closer and closer to the mark.

If you want to be a champion swimmer you have to not only practice and train but also receive your coach's correction so that your stroke becomes more efficient.

From all of these things and more, it's obvious that we need discipline. Discipline is both positive and negative, practice and correction, learning and unlearning.

In a church, discipline is no different. In order to grow to maturity in Christ we need teaching and encouragement, and we also need correction. We need people to spur us on, and we need people to turn us around when we're heading in the wrong direction.

Church discipline encompasses all of this: encouraging and correcting, teaching and confronting.

This study on church discipline begins by addressing the most

common objection to it: “That’s not loving!” Next, we consider how to build one another up in the church (what theologians call “formative discipline”). The next three studies all examine New Testament passages that teach us how to deal with sin in the local church (what theologians call “corrective discipline”). Finally, we study repentance and restoration, which is the goal corrective discipline aims for.

Like an hour at the gym or a full day of speaking a new language, discipline hurts. But it’s a pain that brings growth and strength in its wake. So let’s find out what growth and strength God will give us as we apply ourselves to his discipline in the church.

AN IMPORTANT MARK OF A HEALTHY CHURCH: BIBLICAL CHURCH DISCIPLINE

BY MARK DEVER

(Adapted from chapter 11 of What Is a Healthy Church?)

Biblical church discipline flows directly out of a biblical understanding of church membership. Membership draws a boundary line around the church, marking the church off from the world. Discipline helps the church that lives inside of that boundary line stay true to the very things that are cause for drawing the line in the first place. It gives meaning to being a member of the church and is another important mark of a healthy church.

What exactly is church discipline? In a broad sense, discipline is teaching. In a more narrow sense, some discipline is corrective. In the narrowest sense, it is the act of excluding someone who professes to be a Christian from membership in the church and participation in the Lord's Supper for serious unrepentant sin—sin they refuse to let go of.

IMAGING GOD'S CHARACTER

In order to understand church discipline, it might help us to remind ourselves of God's purposes in creating the universe, humanity, Israel, and the church. God created the universe in order to display his glory. He then created humanity for the same purpose, and particularly by creating us to bear his image (Gen. 1:27). Humanity—Adam and Eve—didn't display his glory, so he excluded them from the garden.

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God then called Israel to display his glory, particularly by displaying his holiness and character to the nations as they were revealed in the law (see Lev. 19:2; Prov. 24:1, 25). Along the way, this law was the basis for correcting and even excluding some people from the community (as in Num. 15:30–31). Ultimately, it was the basis for excluding Israel itself from the land.

Finally, God created the church, we have said, so that it might increasingly reflect the character of God as it's been revealed in his Word. In keeping with the storyline of the entire Bible, then, church discipline is the act of excluding an individual who carelessly brings disrepute onto the gospel and shows no commitment to doing otherwise. Discipline helps the church to reflect God's glorious character faithfully. It helps the church to remain holy. It's an attempt to polish the mirror and remove any specks (see 2 Cor. 6:14–7:1; 13:2; 1 Tim. 6:3–5; 2 Tim. 3:1–5). Why discipline? So that the holy and loving character of God might appear more clearly and shine more brightly.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

How does the process of discipline work? Since the circumstances of sin vary tremendously, so does the need for pastoral wisdom in knowing how to treat each situation particularly.

That said, Jesus's words in Matthew 18 provide the general boundaries (Matt. 18:15–17). Begin by addressing a sinning brother or sister in private. If the sinner repents, the process of discipline ends. If not, then return a second time with another Christian. If he or she still doesn't repent, then, as Jesus put it, "tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Matt. 18:17 NIV), that is, like an outsider.

SHALT THOU JUDGE?

This whole idea can sound harsh to many people today. Besides, didn't Jesus forbid his followers from judging others? In one sense, he certainly did: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged" (Matt. 7:1 NIV). But in the very same Gospel, Jesus also called churches

to rebuke—even publicly—their members for sin (Matt. 18:15–17; cf. Luke 17:3). So whatever Jesus meant by “Do not judge,” he did not mean to rule out everything that might be called “judging” today.

Certainly God himself is a judge. He judged Adam in the garden. In the Old Testament he judged both nations and individuals. In the New Testament he promises that Christians will be judged according to their works (see 1 Corinthians 3). And he promises that, on the final day, he will reveal himself as the ultimate judge of all humanity (see Revelation 20).

In his judgment, God is never wrong. He is always righteous (see Joshua 7; Matthew 23; Luke 2; Acts 5; Romans 9). Sometimes his purposes in judgment are corrective, redemptive, and restorative, as when he disciplines his children. Sometimes his purposes are retributive, vengeful, and final, as when he bears his wrath upon the ungodly (see Hebrews 12). Either way, God’s judgment is always just.

What may surprise many people today is that God occasionally uses human beings to carry out his judgment. The state is given responsibility to judge its citizens (see Romans 13). Christians are told to judge themselves (see 1 Cor. 11:28; Hebrews 4; 2 Pet. 1:5). Congregations are told to occasionally even judge the members of the church—though not in the final way God judges.

In Matthew 18, 1 Corinthians 5 and 6, and elsewhere, the church is instructed to exercise judgment within itself. This judgment is for redemptive, not vengeful, purposes (Rom. 12:19). Paul told the church in Corinth to hand the adulterous man over to Satan “so that [the sinful nature may be destroyed and] his spirit may be saved” (1 Cor. 5:5 NIV). He says the same to Timothy regarding the false teachers in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:20).

CLOSED OR OPEN?

We should not be surprised that God calls us to exercise certain forms of judgment or discipline. If churches expect to have anything to say about how Christians do live, they will have to say something about how Christians do not live. Yet I worry that the way many churches approach discipleship is like pouring water into leaking buckets—all

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the attention is given to what is poured in with no thought given to how it's received and kept. One sign of this tendency is the decline in the practice of church discipline in the last few generations.

One church-growth writer recently summed up his strategy on growing churches by saying, "Open the front door and close the back door." By this he means that churches should make themselves more accessible to outsiders while also doing a better job of follow-up. These are good goals. Yet I suspect that most pastors and churches today already aspire to do this, and to a fault. So let me offer what I believe is a more biblical strategy: guard carefully the front door and open the back door. In other words, make it more difficult to join, on the one hand, and make it easier to be excluded on the other. Remember—the path to life is narrow, not broad. Doing this, I believe, will help churches to recover their divinely intended distinction from the world.

One of the first steps in exercising discipline, therefore, is to exercise greater care in receiving new members. A church should ask every individual applying for membership what the gospel is and ask each one to give some evidence of understanding the nature of a Christ-honoring life. Member candidates will benefit from knowing what the church expects from them and the importance of commitment. If churches are more careful about recognizing and receiving new members, they will have less occasion to practice corrective church discipline later.

DOING DISCIPLINE RESPONSIBLY

Church discipline can be done badly. The New Testament teaches us not to judge others for the motives we might impute to them (see Matt. 7:1), or to judge each other about matters that are not essential (see Romans 14–15). In carrying out discipline, our attitudes must not be vindictive but loving, demonstrating a "mercy, mixed with fear" (Jude 23 NIV). There's no denying it, church discipline is fraught with problems of wisdom and pastoral application. But we must remember that the whole Christian life is difficult and open to abuse. And our difficulties should not be used as an excuse to leave something unpracticed.

Each local church has a responsibility to judge the life and teaching of its leaders and members, particularly when either compromises the church's witness to the gospel (see Acts 17; 1 Corinthians 5; 1 Timothy 3; James 3:1; 2 Peter 3; 2 John).

Biblical church discipline is simple obedience to God and a confession that we need help. Can you imagine a world in which God never used our fellow human beings to enact his judgment, one in which parents never disciplined children, the state never punished lawbreakers, and churches never reproved their members? We would all arrive at judgment day never having felt the lash of earthly judgment and so been forewarned of the greater judgment then upon us. How merciful of God to teach us now about the irrevocable justice to come with these temporary chastisements (see Luke 12:4–5).

Here are five positive reasons for practicing corrective church discipline. It shows love for:

- 1) the good of the disciplined individual;
- 2) other Christians as they see the danger of sin;
- 3) the health of the church as a whole;
- 4) the corporate witness of the church and, therefore, non-Christians in the community; and
- 5) the glory of God.

Our holiness should reflect God's holiness. It should mean something to be a member of the church, not for our pride's sake, but for God's name's sake. Biblical church discipline is another important mark of a healthy church.



WEEK 1

IS DISCIPLINE LOVING?

GETTING STARTED

1. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word “discipline”?
2. What other things do you associate with the idea of discipline? Are these things good or bad? Pleasant or unpleasant?

This lesson begins a series of six studies on the topic of church discipline. Since this is a neglected and challenging topic, let’s begin with some basic teaching before jumping into the Bible passage we’re going to focus on.

Defining Discipline

Broadly speaking, *discipline* is everything the church does to help its members pursue holiness and fight sin. Preaching, teaching, prayer, reading and memorizing the Bible, corporate worship, accountability relationships, and godly oversight by pastors and elders are all forms of discipline. Theologians often call this kind of discipline “formative discipline” because it forms our character to be more like Christ.

In a narrower sense, discipline is when we point out fellow church members’ sin and encourage them to repent and pursue holiness by God’s grace. Theologians often call this kind of discipline “corrective discipline.” It means correcting fellow church members when they begin to veer from the path of following Christ. As we’ll see in coming studies, Jesus commands the church not only to correct sin and pursue the sinner’s repentance but also to exclude someone from the church if they continue to cling to their sin instead of clinging to Jesus.

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Is Discipline Loving?

Discipline involves correction, confrontation, and, if necessary, exclusion. When some people hear this, they throw up their hands and say, “I want nothing to do with that! That’s the most unloving thing I’ve ever heard!”

Thus, this study answers the question: Is discipline loving? In order to do that, we’re going to consider a passage of Scripture that teaches us about how God disciplines us and why.

MAIN IDEA

God disciplines us because he loves us. His purpose is to help his children grow in holiness and humble dependence on him.

DIGGING IN

The book of Hebrews is filled with stirring exhortations to keep on trusting in Christ through opposition, persecution, and suffering. In this study we’ll consider Hebrews 12:3–11:

³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. ⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵ And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reprovved by him.

⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.”

⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?

⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹ Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?

¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he 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.

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1. In verse three, what does the author of Hebrews exhort us to do? For what purpose?

2. According to verses 5 and 6, whom does God discipline? What does this teach us about God's attitude toward those whom he disciplines?

3. Many people have had human fathers who disciplined them in anger, in selfishness, and in excess. What can we be certain about when it comes to God's discipline?

4. What does the "exhortation that addresses you as sons" (Prov. 3:11-12) tell us to do? Why (Heb. 12:5-6)?

5. Put yourself in the shoes of believers who are being persecuted and harassed for their faith. Why is it especially comforting to know that you are God's child, and that these circumstances, among other purposes, may be his way of disciplining and teaching you?

6. What comparison do verses 7 through 11 draw? How does this help us to understand God's discipline?

7. What does verse 8 say about those who have not received God's discipline? How should this comfort us when we do receive God's discipline?

8. What is the proper response to parental discipline (v. 9)?

9. According to verse 10, our earthly fathers disciplined us

- _____ a _____
- as it _____ best _____.

But God disciplines us:

- _____
- that we may _____.

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What does this comparison teach us about how we should respond to God's discipline?

10. What does discipline feel like now? What does it bring about later (v. 11)? Give some concrete examples of situations in which this long-term perspective can help us endure God's discipline.

Looking back over the whole passage, we see that it teaches us several things about God's discipline:

- The *objects* of God's discipline are his children (vv. 5–8).
- The *motive* of God's discipline is love (v. 6).
- The *goal* of God's discipline is our holiness (v. 10).
- The *present experience* of God's discipline is painful (v. 11).
- The *long-term fruit* of God's discipline is a harvest of righteousness in our lives (v. 11).

11. We know from elsewhere in the book of Hebrews that the main form of divine discipline these believers were experiencing was persecution for their faith.

- What are some other forms of divine discipline that you've experienced or are currently experiencing?
- How can this passage's teaching help you grow through these trials of faith?
- What fruit of God's discipline have you seen in your own life? What encouragement does this provide as you experience God's discipline now?

12. As we considered at the outset of this study, some people consider the very idea of church discipline—drawing attention to others' sin, calling for repentance, and so on—to be mean spirited and hateful. How would you respond to someone who held this view in light of what we've seen in this passage?

PERSONAL NOTES

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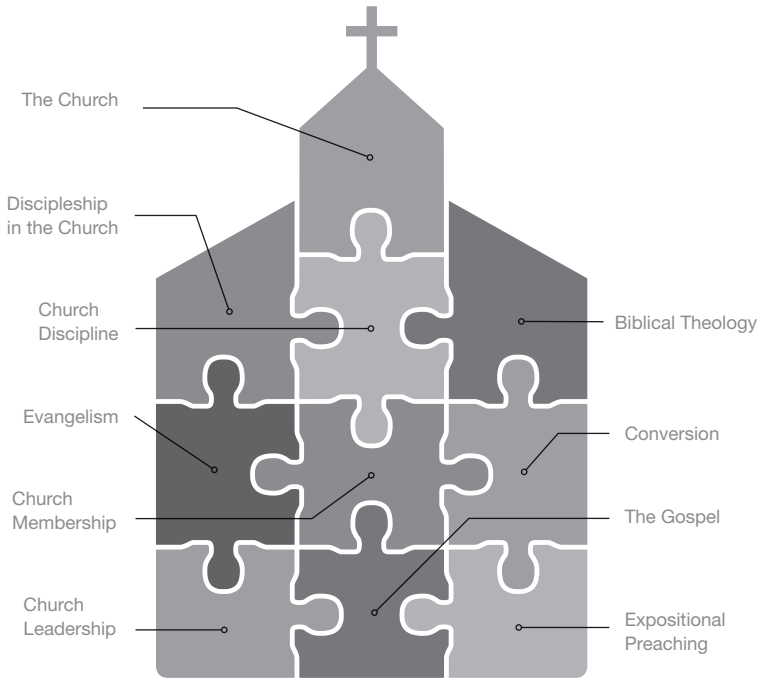
Building Healthy Churches

9Marks exists to equip church leaders with a biblical vision and practical resources for displaying God's glory to the nations through healthy churches.

To that end, we want to see churches characterized by these nine marks of health:

- 1** **Expositional Preaching**
- 2** **Biblical Theology**
- 3** **A Biblical Understanding of the Gospel**
- 4** **A Biblical Understanding of Conversion**
- 5** **A Biblical Understanding of Evangelism**
- 6** **Biblical Church Membership**
- 7** **Biblical Church Discipline**
- 8** **Biblical Discipleship**
- 9** **Biblical Church Leadership**

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Be sure to check out the rest of the
**9MARKS HEALTHY CHURCH
STUDY GUIDE SERIES**

This series covers the nine distinctives of a healthy church as originally laid out in *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* by Mark Dever. Each book explores the biblical foundations of key aspects of the church, helping Christians to live out those realities as members of a local body. A perfect resource for use in Sunday school, church-wide studies, or small group contexts.





CHURCH DISCIPLINE.

While church discipline is never easy, it is sometimes a necessary, albeit painful, part of the Christian life. This helpful study guide tackles the difficult topic in six chapters designed to focus discussion on the interpretation and application of biblical texts. Participants will discover the role of church discipline and learn how to practice it in a gracious and loving way.

“I am unaware of any other tool that so thoroughly and practically helps Christians understand God’s plan for the local church. I can’t wait to use these studies in my own congregation.”

JERAMIE RINNE, Senior Pastor, South Shore Baptist Church, Hingham, Massachusetts

“Rich exposition, compelling questions, and clear syntheses combine to give a guided tour of ecclesiology—the theology of the church. I know of no better curriculum for generating understanding of and involvement in the church than this.”

RICK HOLLAND, Senior Pastor, Mission Road Bible Church, Prairie Village, Kansas

“I have used these guides for the last year at my own church and appreciate how easy they are to adapt to my own setting. Highly recommended!”

MICHAEL LAWRENCE, Senior Pastor, Hinson Baptist Church, Portland, Oregon

9MARKS HEALTHY CHURCH STUDY GUIDES are a series of ten 6–7 week studies covering the nine distinctives of a healthy church originally laid out in *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* by Mark Dever. This series explores the biblical foundations of key aspects of the church, helping Christians to live out those realities as members of a local body. Conveniently packaged and accessibly written, the format of this series is guided, inductive discussion of Scripture passages and is ideal for use in Sunday school, church-wide studies, and individual or small group contexts.

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