

## MARK 7

**A HEALTHY CHURCH MEMBER SEEKS DISCIPLINE**

**Life needs to be ordered.** That's a simple truth too often forgotten or overlooked. In order to thrive and grow, all life needs order.

Chaos, then, is the enemy of growth. Disorganization, sloppiness, and inattention generally introduce the kind of instability that weakens rather than strengthens. Where there is no order there will likely be little in the environment that sustains and nourishes. Life needs to be ordered.

Young married couples discover this when God gives them children. Their lives up to this point may have been characterized by a "foot loose and fancy free" attitude, but they soon realize that in order to properly care for and raise a child they will need to maintain a certain amount of order. Sleep and feeding routines must be established. Small and dangerous objects must be removed. Outlets must be covered. Diaper changes, baths, fresh clothing all must be provided at the right times. Order must reign if growth is to occur. It's a fact of life.

Well, order is also necessary in spiritual matters. Without the proper establishment of routines, boundaries, and patterns, thriving spiritually most likely will not occur or will be haphazard at best. Another word for the order needed to grow spiritually is *discipline*.

***What Is Discipline?***

Today, when people hear the word *discipline*, they most likely think of negative forms of punishment, like spanking a rebellious child. To many, discipline sounds harsh, something to be avoided or something that only unkind or unmerciful people pursue. For others, it sounds restrictive of freedom and joy. To be sure, discipline is not always a pleasant experience. The writer in Hebrews makes this point: "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant" (Heb. 12:11).

But actually, the word *discipline* has a much broader and more positive meaning than "unpleasant punishment." *Discipline* and *disciple* share the same Latin root and are tied closely to the idea of education and order. The disciple is a student, one who participates in a certain discipline, who learns a profession, or who masters a body of thought. Such a person has his or her life ordered under or by the rules of a trade. So, professional athletes abide by the rules of their sports. Psychology professors dedicate themselves to this or that school of thought. Doctors adhere to the principles of the American Medical Association or the Hippocratic Oath. All of these are disciples of and disciplined by the principles of their field.

The same is true with the church. The church is a place where everything in the gathered services should "be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40). That order is necessary for edification.

And discipline is necessary in the lives of individual believers as well. Jay Adams summarized the connection between orderly discipline, learning, and the Christian life well: “When we are baptized into the church, we thereby matriculate into Christ’s school. Then, for the rest of our earthly life, we are to be taught (not facts alone, but also) to obey the commands of Christ. This is education with force, education backed up by the discipline of good order that is necessary for learning to take place.”<sup>2</sup>

So discipline is about education and learning, order and growth. It is discipline in the life of the congregation and the healthy church member that provides an atmosphere for growth and development. It leads to the rare polished jewel of Christlikeness.

### ***What Does Discipline Look Like in the Life of a Healthy Church Member?***

Two forms of discipline occur in the life of healthy congregations and church members. Both of these approaches to discipline have their origin in the Word of God, and, in fact, are two ways of understanding the purpose and effect of God’s Word in the life of his people.

The apostle writes in 2 Timothy 3:16, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”

In other words, the Scripture, which is “breathed out” or inspired by God, has two general purposes: *formative discipline* and *corrective discipline*. When Paul writes that the Scripture is “profitable for teaching” and “for training in righteousness,” he is describing positive or formative discipline. Formative discipline refers to how Scripture shapes and molds the Christian as he or she imbibes its teaching and is trained to live for God. While medical doctors are governed by the standards and oaths of their profession; Christians are shaped and governed by the Word of God.

Likewise, when Paul refers to the Scriptures as profitable “for reproof, for correction” he is describing how the Word of God confronts us and turns us away from error to righteousness. This is corrective discipline.

The vast majority of discipline in any church will be positive or formative discipline as people grow from the preached Word, as they study the Scriptures in personal devotion, and as they are shaped by fellowship and encouragement from brethren in Christ. But from time to time a brother or sister will indulge in sin and need loving reproof or correction from other members of the church who are committed to the welfare of his or her soul. Moreover, the Scriptures address various situations requiring correction. Our Lord Jesus outlined a process for corrective discipline in cases where one brother sins against another (Matt. 18:15–17). The apostle Paul exhorted the Corinthian church to confront and expel from membership a brother taken in scandalous sexual sin (1 Corinthians 5). And not only is the church’s correction necessary for the “really bad” sins like sexual immorality, but even the seemingly more mundane, disorderly sins such as laziness and false teaching warrant correction (2 Thess. 3:6, 11; Titus 3:10).

No one lives an entire life without the need of discipline, whether positive or corrective. So the healthy church member embraces discipline as one means of grace in the Christian life.

### ***How Do We Joyfully Seek Discipline?***

The topic of church discipline may be new to you. Or maybe the topic isn't new, but the practice of discipline in your local church may be quite new or nonexistent. Some people will have to simultaneously grow in their understanding of this important topic, confront fears or wrong impressions, and contribute to their church's health. What follows are a few suggestions for cultivating a desire for both positive and corrective discipline so that we might be healthy members of our churches.

## **RECEIVE THE WORD OF GOD WITH MEEKNESS**

James calls Christians to "put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" (James 1:21). Implicit in James's instruction is a distinction between an ungodly life of filthiness and wickedness and the Christlike life of humility or meekness. Christians should receive the Word of God with meekness. That is, in the preaching of God's Word and in Bible study, Christians should remain lowly and gentle before the Scripture, acknowledging it as the source of salvation and instruction in godly living. As we come to the Scripture, we are to do so as people knowing our sinful nature, our spiritual poverty before God, and our need for the molding influence of God, which comes normally by his Word.

How can we know if we are receiving God's Word with meekness? Perhaps the following questions will help:

- As we read the Bible, are we reading for information only or with faith that God actually speaks through his Word?
- When we hear the Word preached, are we generally looking to have a need met (for example, to be entertained or to gather some practical advice) or are we primarily desiring to understand the original meaning of the text and apply it to our lives?
- Is our first reaction to the Scripture "how does this make me feel?" or "do I accept this as true?" Do we allow our feelings to determine what's true, or do we allow the Scriptures to determine our feelings?
- Is our listening posture during sermons or Scripture readings defensive or combative, as though we demand someone to "prove it to us"?
- Do we tend to judge other philosophies and viewpoints by the Scripture, or do we try to either reconcile or judge the Scripture by other philosophies and views?

Receiving the Word with meekness means accepting the Bible by faith, with a friendly and submissive heart, and with the testimony of God's Spirit. Specifically, we accept the fact that the Bible is true, that it's the only sufficient authority for shaping our lives, and that it must govern how we feel and think. By doing so, the healthy church member prepares himself for the formative discipline of Christ's church.

## **LEARN TO RECOGNIZE CHASTISEMENT AS EVIDENCE OF GOD'S LOVE**

If you are troubled by the perception that church discipline is unkind or unloving, consider the fact that the Bible tells us that God himself is a loving Father who disciplines his children: “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” (Heb. 12:5–6).

Receiving discipline at the hand of God is evidence of his love for us. Wherever he reproves and chastises us, we can be certain that he is treating us as a father would treat a son. Discipline is an act of love, not of vengeance or hatred. The writer in Hebrews goes on to state, “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?” (Heb. 12:7).

And what is the goal of this loving Father’s discipline? He does it that we might “be subject to the Father of spirits and live” and “share his holiness” (Heb. 12:9–10). In love, the Father is protecting our lives and conforming us to his holiness as he corrects and chastises us. A healthy church member recognizes this chastisement as love and accepts it as one source of assurance, since those who are not so chastised are “illegitimate children and not sons” (Heb. 12:8).

## **HUMBLY ACCEPT CORRECTION FROM OTHERS**

Not only do healthy church members accept the Lord’s chastisement, but they humbly accept correction from others. They recognize that often the Lord’s correction comes through other members in the church, saints who care enough not only to encourage in good times but to confront and correct when necessary. Healthy church members agree that “better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend” (Prov. 27:5–6).

Many churches that take membership seriously ask new members to review, support, and sometimes sign their church’s covenant. A church covenant is a document that briefly summarizes the commitment church members make before the Lord and to each other to live out the Christian faith in a manner ordered by Scripture.

One of my favorite lines in a typical church covenant addresses this important issue of accepting love and correction from others:

We will walk together in brotherly love, as becomes the members of a Christian Church, exercise an affectionate care and watchfulness over each other and faithfully admonish and entreat one another as occasion may require.

“Fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov. 1:7), but it is the nature of true godliness, maturity, and health in church members to accept the loving instruction and rebuke of others.

## **TAKE SERIOUSLY OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO DISCIPLINE OTHERS**

A fourth way we may cultivate a healthy desire for godly discipline is to take seriously our responsibility to care for others in this way. Here’s another line in a typical church covenant that addresses this responsibility: “We will work together for the continuance of a faithful evangelical ministry in this church, as we sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines.” It is a basic responsibility and privilege of every church member to help sustain the discipline of the

local church. This is why the classic passages, such as Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5, dealing with unrepentant sin conclude with a final and decisive action by the congregation. But not only does correction belong to the congregation as a whole; it begins as each individual is proactive in love and seeks to restore those who are caught in sin.

## **DON'T FORGET TO REJOICE!**

It may be easy to think of church discipline only in terms of the grief and sorrow that accompany sin and the loss of a brother or sister. And such grief has its place (Matt. 5:4; 1 Cor. 5:2). But the entire process of discipline, from the formative work of the Word to the corrective work of the church in sometimes removing an unrepentant member, should be undertaken with hope and the goal of repentance that leads to rejoicing and comfort (2 Cor. 2:6). We are endeavoring to win our brothers and sisters to the truth (James 5:19–20), and when that happens we are to rejoice along with the courts of heaven. Perhaps nothing is quite as sweet as seeing a person who is deceived and being destroyed by sin break free from sin's merciless grip and discover afresh the freedom and forgiveness of our merciful Savior. As healthy church members endeavoring to strengthen our churches, we can participate in the discipline of the church with joy and faith, knowing that our loving Father graciously and faithfully corrects those whom he loves. It's our delight to see the tracings of God's handiwork displayed in the growth, repentance, and restoration of those who receive the grace of discipline.

## **Conclusion**

It is impossible for members of a church to care effectively for each other if only a few people own the responsibility of correcting or instructing brothers or sisters in need of it. If members don't give themselves to serving others by teaching the Word in Sunday school or leading small groups, if members shy away from getting to know one another so that there is no context for meaningful fellowship, then neither positive nor corrective discipline will occur. The house of God will be inadequately ordered, his children poorly taught, and the witness of the church tarnished by unrepentant and uncorrected sin.

## **For Further Reflection**

With a group of Christian friends and church members, consider and discuss the questions listed on pages 77–78.

## **For Further Reading**

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## ***For Pastors***

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## MARK 8

### **A HEALTHY CHURCH MEMBER IS A GROWING DISCIPLE**

**A healthy church member is** a growing church member.

It is impossible to separate the health of a local church from the health of its members. And it's impossible to divide the well-being of a church member from his or her spiritual growth and discipleship.

#### ***When Christians Do Not Grow***

This is speculation on my part, but it may be the case that the most chronic problem facing churches and Christians is the lack of consistent spiritual growth and progress in discipleship. We all know Christians who have confessed faith and repentance, yet who sadly admit that they have not grown in some time. This situation comes in two varieties. There is the temporary plateau or spiritual rut that every Christian experiences and must overcome from time to time. This is normal and shouldn't cause too much alarm. Perhaps routines need to be changed or focus renewed, but the problem isn't chronic yet.

But then there is the chronic variety. Here, people may not be able to perceive much growth over a prolonged period of time. They've fallen into something deeper than a rut. They're not just "stuck," struggling to get free; they've settled into a spiritual slumber. If they have been in this sleep for some time, perhaps they believe that there is no more growth to be had or even that following Christ is a shallow, hollow thing. The expectation of growth may be abandoned. Pride may be asserting, "I've arrived spiritually and there's really not much more growing to do."

Where this happens there should be great alarm! In our largely individualistic and privatized spiritual worlds, such trouble can go unnoticed, unspoken, and uncorrected for some time.

Advancement in the knowledge and likeness of Christ, spiritual maturity and progress toward it, are supposed to be normal for the Christian. So Hebrews exhorts us to "leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity" (Heb.6:1). The writer assumes that these Christians should have progressed "by this time ... to be teachers," having moved from "milk" for the unskilled child to "solid food ... for the mature" (Heb. 5:11–13).

Speaking of himself, the apostle Paul modeled how to maintain humility when it comes to spiritual growth:

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it on my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3:12–14)

Then he gives this exhortation to his readers, “Let those of us who are mature think this way” (v. 15a).

It is normal for Christians to grow, to work for growth, and to expect increasing spiritual maturity. Those who do are healthy church members.

### ***Problems in Our Thinking about Growth***

But saying that a Christian should expect, work for, and experience growth isn’t the end of the issue. For the Christian to grow in a healthy way, we must clarify what growth is and is not. Ours is a superficial culture that lays emphasis on the outward signs and neglects the inward reality. We’re far too vulnerable to settling for being thought of as mature rather than actually being mature.

Jesus’ teaching in Luke 18 helps us to identify at least two attitudes that hinder solid biblical growth and discipleship:

He ... told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:9–14)

Three problems in the Pharisee’s thinking prevented him from growing in godliness.

1) *The performance trap*. In all major sports, statistics are recorded for player performance—batting percentage, field goal percentage, number of stolen bases, home runs, touchdowns, assists, and on and on. Often the worth of an athlete is summed up by these statistics. And those who can “stuff the stat sheet” with big numbers are celebrated, heralded as “marquis players,” and given awards.

Our idea of Christian growth can be influenced by a “stuffing the stat sheet” mindset. Notice the Pharisee spoke with God about himself and all he had done. He measured growth in observable goals and objectives—fasting twice a week and giving tithes of all he received. We can do this too. We emphasize the number of times we completed “quiet times” this week, the number of times we passed Christian literature to others, or how often we shared the gospel. We can fall into the performance trap, thinking that spiritual growth and discipleship look like good

performance and success. When this happens our sense of growth and worth become wrongly tied up with our “stats.”

2) *Judging by the wrong standards.* Another thing that often misguides Christians when it comes to growth is the tendency to judge our well-being by comparing ourselves to others. Many Christians are relativists in this way. The Pharisee was proud before God that he “was not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” Imagine that! Kneeling to pray before God and simultaneously judging and denouncing the man praying right next to him! Jonathan Edwards’s eighth resolution is a better approach. Edwards wrote:

Resolved, To act, in all respects, both speaking and doing, as if nobody had been so vile as I, and as if I had committed the same sins, or had the same infirmities or failings, as others, and that I will let the knowledge of their failings promote nothing but shame in myself, and prove only an occasion of my confessing my own sins and misery to God.

If we’re focusing on others in an attempt to justify ourselves before God or to “exalt ourselves” as “giants of the faith,” we will not only *not* grow as we ought, but we will also delude ourselves into thinking we’re better than we are. And we may be sure that God will humble us. So it is better to humble ourselves and trust in the grace of God than to be opposed by God because of pride (James 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5).

3) *Depending on personal strength or effort in spiritual growth.* This is another of the Pharisee’s mistakes. As far as he is concerned, all that should commend him before God is a result of his effort and ability. But self-effort is not the source of true spiritual growth. After the writer to the Hebrews exhorts them to “leave the elementary doctrines of Christ and go on to maturity,” he adds, “And this we will do if God permits” (Heb. 6:1, 3). Holy Scripture tells us that our progress in discipleship and spiritual maturity depends on the grace and will of God, not on our self-effort and strength. This is why the apostle Paul praises God for the growth of Christians (2 Thess. 1:3) and prays to God for continued growth (1 Thess. 3:11–13; Col. 1:10). We are commanded to grow and to cultivate maturity and godliness (2 Pet. 1:5–8, 3:18, for example), but all of our efforts are exercised in dependence upon God and with faith in him for the growth we seek.

So biblical growth should not be confused with outward performance alone, nor is it measured by using others as our standard. And it does not finally depend on our self-effort and attainments. What, then, is growth and how does the healthy church member pursue it?

## ***The Growth We Want to See***

A healthy church member has a pervasive concern for his or her own personal growth and the growth of other members of her or his church. As Mark Dever correctly notes, “Working to promote Christian discipleship and growth is working to bring glory not to ourselves but to God. This is how God will make himself known in the world.” Since a concern for God’s glory should be uppermost in our lives as believers, our concern for growth should be pervasive.

Several passages of Scripture outline for us the kind of growth healthy church members should hope to see in themselves and others. For example, Galatians 5:22–25 lists for us the fruit of the Spirit, evidences of Spirit-wrought virtue and character that typify those who live not according to their own power and sinful nature but by the Spirit. We are to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18).



Ephesians 4:11–13 reminds us that the Lord gives gifted men to the church for the purpose of growth “for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”

We can sum up all of these pictures and exhortations with either the term “godliness” or “holiness.” The growth we wish to see, the growth that is not finally external and superficial, is growth in godliness or holiness, growth in “the stature of the fullness of Christ.” A growing church member is someone who looks more and more like Jesus in attitude of heart, thought, speech, and action. That’s what we long to be and long for our churches to be.

## ***Growing to Be Like Jesus***

How do healthy church members cultivate such growth? The following are some suggestions for continuing to develop godliness or holiness in life.

### **ABIDE IN CHRIST**

Jesus said:

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” (John 15:5–8)

The key to growth in godliness is remaining in the True Vine, who is Christ Jesus. Here, remaining in Christ and bearing fruit is “nothing less than the outcome of persevering dependence on the vine, driven by faith, embracing all of the believer’s life and the product of his witness.” And this fruitfulness comes as the Word of the Lord remains in the disciple. “Such words must so lodge in the disciple’s mind and heart that conformity to Christ, obedience to Christ, is the most natural (supernatural?) thing in the world.”<sup>4</sup> Abiding in Christ, remaining in his Word, is essential to proper Christian discipleship and growth.

### **USE THE ORDINARY MEANS OF GRACE**

Many Christians seem to believe advancement in spiritual maturity must come through some extraordinary or “breakthrough” experience. For them, it’s the fantastic that produces growth. But as we’ve just seen in John 15, it is the ordinary means of grace that ordinarily produces growth and maturity. In fact, while the sensational and extraordinary can and often does lead people astray, the Word properly taught and understood never will. The “ordinary means of grace” include the study of the Word of God, participation in the ordinances of baptism and communion along with the gathered church, and prayer. These are the customary ways in which the grace of God is proclaimed, displayed, and appropriated in the Christian life. By the Word of God, we hear Christ revealed and glorified, and there we “learn Christ” most clearly. But in the

ordinances of baptism and communion, we see Christ and the gospel as we picture his death, burial, and resurrection for us and for our salvation.

A healthy Christian does not neglect these ordinances and means of grace but rejoices in them, prepares for them, and is reminded through the senses of the glories of Christ our Savior. She or he remembers that grace “teaches [or trains] us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age” (Titus 2:11–12). A healthy Christian relies more and more on the grace of God as it is communicated through the Word and the ordinances.

## **PARTICIPATE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH**

Hebrews 10:25 instructs us not to neglect the assembly of the saints. Instead, we are to gather and encourage one another more and more as we await Jesus’ return. The public assembly is meant for the edification, the building up, the growth of the Christian. Neglecting to participate in the corporate life of the church or failing to actively serve and be served is a sure-fire way to limit our growth. Ephesians 4:11–16 offers a pretty strong argument that participation in the body of Christ is the main way in which Christ strengthens and matures us. When we serve others in the church, bear with one another, love one another, correct one another, and encourage one another, we participate in a kind of “spiritual maturity co-op” where our stores and supplies are multiplied. The end result is growth and discipleship.

## **LOOK TO JESUS’ COMING**

Finally, we grow in holiness by meditating on and looking forward to the coming of Jesus. Most of the New Testament references to Jesus’ return are connected with some exhortation to holiness and purity. For example, in Matthew 25 when Jesus finishes teaching the disciples about his second coming, he concludes with the simple exhortation to “be ready,” to look for his return, and to live a fitting life in the meantime. Matthew 26 follows with three parables, all exhorting his hearers to watch and to be faithful until he returns. The Lord taught that his second coming is something for us to meditate upon consistently, and that that meditation should lead us to guard our lives and to grow.

Titus 2:13–14 refers to the “blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” with this explanation of Jesus’ mission: “[He] gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.” In other words, we look to the cross and the second coming of Christ and remember that Christ has done everything for our redemption, purity, and zeal—our holiness. The apostle John includes a very similar statement in one of his letters. He writes:

Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. (1 John 3:2–3)

Our yearning to be *with* Jesus and to *see* Jesus is intended to make us more *like* Jesus in holiness. Looking forward to Christ will produce growth in healthy church members.

## **Conclusion**

The healthy church member is a growing church member. Specifically, she or he is a church member that grows in Christlikeness, holiness, and maturity. That maturity and holiness are developed in dependence upon Christ, his Word, and others in the local church. And most wonderful of all, we will not stop growing until we reach the fullness of Christ!

## **For Further Reflection**

1. Are there any wrong ways you have been measuring or thinking about growth? If so, what are they? What would you say needs to change in your thinking? What counsel do group members give you on this matter?
2. With a group of Christian friends and church members, discuss ways in which you all have been growing lately. In what ways are holy desires and habits being cultivated by God's grace?
3. Which of the strategies for spiritual growth are most needed in your life right now? How will you put them into action?

## **For Further Reading**

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## MARK 9

### **A HEALTHY CHURCH MEMBER IS A HUMBLE FOLLOWER**

**The health of a** local church may ride exclusively on the membership's response to the church's leadership. How the congregation receives or rejects its leaders has a direct effect on the possibilities of faithful ministry and church health. Does a congregation appreciate and accept sound preaching? Will its members trust and follow a leader in difficult or unclear situations? Do they rally behind or tear apart the leadership when plans and ideas fail?

In the final analysis, church members are the people who generally make or break a local church. And making or breaking a church has a lot to do with the membership's attitudes and actions toward its leaders.

So no serious attempt to define a healthy church member can neglect reflecting on the interaction between church members and church leaders. And not surprisingly, the inspired Word of God provides ample instruction regarding the *attitudes* and *actions* of church members who wish to contribute to the health of their local congregations by following the leadership of the church.

### ***A Healthy Church Member's Attitude toward Leadership***

At least three attitudes characterize a healthy church member's when it comes to following a local church's leaders.

1) *Honors the elders.* Several passages of Scripture instruct church members to honor the elders and leaders of the congregation. For example, 1 Timothy 5:17 tells us, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching." What does such double honor include? The apostle Paul brings attention to two things in the following verses. In verse 18, honoring the elders includes caring for their financial and physical needs.

A congregation and a member that honor its leadership provide appropriate and sufficient wages for its leaders, particularly those whose full-time labor is ministry to the body.

In verse 19, the apostle indicates that honoring our leaders includes protecting their reputations. We are not to "admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses." The apostle understands better than anyone how the ministry is open to charges, criticisms, and complaints from outside and inside the church. A healthy church member will help to shelter the shepherd from unwarranted slings and arrows. Rumors and backbitings die at the ears of a healthy church member who refuses to give consideration to unedifying and uncorroborated tales.

A healthy church member honors the elder's office. He or she esteems it highly, is thankful for it, and respects those who serve the Lord's people as elders. We honor our pastors because on the day of the Lord they shall be our boast (2 Cor. 1:14).

2) *Shows open-hearted love to the leaders.* The honor and respect a church member gives an elder is not the distant and official honor a soldier gives a commanding officer. Coupled with the honor due a shepherd is an open-hearted love. Repeatedly, Paul called the Corinthian church to open their hearts to him as one who cared for them spiritually:

We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also. (2 Cor.6:11-13)

There should be a sweet exchange of affection between pastor and congregation. As they live, grow, and labor together, their hearts are to open increasingly wide to each other. A healthy church member does not "withhold" his affection from the pastor; rather, he gives it freely and liberally.

A healthy church member doesn't want to hear his or her faithful pastor plead like the apostle did with the Corinthians, "Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together" (2 Cor. 7:2-3).

A healthy member first gives himself to the Lord and then to the minister of the Lord, knowing that this is God's will (2 Cor. 8:5). Such a member sees how the faithful pastor will spend himself for the body in love. And he would be ashamed to hear the pastor ask, "If I love you more, will you love me less?" (2 Cor. 12:15). Unrequited love is fit for Shakespearean tragedy, not the local church. Our rejoicing in and love for our pastors should "refresh their hearts in the Lord" (Philem. 20).

3) *Is teachable*. A healthy church member should also have a teachable spirit. A teachable spirit evidences humility of heart and a desire to grow in Christ. Without it, a people grow stiff-necked and incorrigible.

The leader's job may be boiled down to one task: teaching. If a member or any significant portion of the membership proves unteachable, the shepherd's task becomes a burden, even undoable, since it's opposing him at this most essential point. Writing to Timothy, Paul provides wonderful instruction for pastors that contains good instruction for members as well. Speaking of the role of elder, Paul writes:

The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will. (2 Tim. 2:24-26)

Several things from this passage are useful for church members to observe. First, the pastor's instruction is meant to be gentle, kind, and for our good. We should not take sinful advantage of that God-ordained disposition. Rather, we should accept that kind instruction as a rebuke and a call to repentance. A healthy church member doesn't mistake godly kindness for weakness in a pastor, but uses the occasion to examine his or her own heart for areas needing repentance. Second, we should recognize how easy it is to "oppose" the pastor as he instructs us. As a regular part of our spiritual life, we should ask ourselves, "Am I in any way opposing the teaching of the pastor?" Third, we should pray for knowledge of the truth, clear-mindedness, and protection from the devil's schemes whenever we discover even a kernel of opposition to pastoral instruction. The pastors watch over our souls as a man who must give an account to God; we should then trust and accept their leadership joyfully as a gift from God for our everlasting benefit. Be teachable.

### ***A Healthy Church Member's Actions toward Leadership***

In addition to these basic attitudes or dispositions, there are some specific actions a healthy church member will take in order to effectively follow the leadership of a local church.

#### **PATIENTLY PARTICIPATES IN THE SELECTION OF LEADERS**

Perhaps the most important decision a congregation makes—assuming a congregational polity—is the selection of its leaders. By choosing leaders, a congregation sets the spiritual tone and direction of the church, sometimes for generations. Perhaps this is why the apostles instructed the early church to look for spiritual qualities and maturity in its leaders (Acts 6:1–6; 1 Timothy 3). Selecting a leader is to be done with patience and prayerful deliberation. “Lay hands on no man hastily” is the apostle’s instruction to Timothy (1 Tim. 5:22a). The first deacons were to be “full of the Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3). Discerning these qualities requires prayer, observation, and patience. And if the Lord’s church is to be healthy, church members must call and ordain leaders who are spiritually minded and mature in Christ.

Healthy church members do not overlook the importance of this essential task. They may invite the prospective leader and his family to lunch or dinner in order to know him better. They will want to hear more about the man’s testimony, about his desire to serve in a leadership capacity, and about his previous ministry in churches. Some churches allow two months between a man’s nomination for leadership and the actual vote in order for members to participate in precisely this way.

## **OBEYS AND SUBMITS TO LEADERS**

Here’s a good reason to prayerfully and patiently participate in the recognition of church leaders: a healthy church member must obey and submit to her or his leaders. *Obey* and *submit* are not only “bad words” at weddings, they’re bad words to many church members. Yet the Bible couldn’t be clearer: “Obey your leaders and submit to them” (Heb. 13:17). Our obedience is to make their work a joy, not a burden. And our obedience redounds to our benefit, since it would be of no advantage for us to call men as leaders and then disobey them. A healthy church member orders himself under the leaders of the congregation as a soldier orders himself in the rank and file beneath a military general. We are to joyfully, eagerly, and completely submit to our leaders for our good, their good, and the good of the entire body.

## **FOLLOWS THE LEADERS’ EXAMPLE**

One reason the Lord appoints men to leadership in the church is to provide a flesh-and-blood example of faithful, godly living to the congregation. Our leaders are the “motion picture” of following Jesus. They are called to be an example in everything (1 Tim. 4:12; 1 Pet. 5:3). That’s why the apostle Paul says, “Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us” (Phil. 3:17). A healthy church member patterns his or her life after the godly lifestyle of the elders of the church. We are to follow our leaders’ example with the expectation of conformity to Christ.

For many in our day, this very idea of imitation sounds cultish. There are too many personality cults where people parrot all that the celebrity pastor says or does. We’re correct to be concerned with such an unbiblical notion of example setting and mentorship. Yet the Bible’s picture of following the pastor’s example points to genuine godliness “in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity” (1 Tim. 4:12) by doing what is good (Titus 2:7). Pastors are called to be such models, and healthy church members wisely follow their pattern of holiness.

## **PRAYS FOR LEADERS**

Given all that church leaders must do and contend with, can you think of a more important thing to do than to pray for them? Even the apostle Paul understood his need for the saints' faithful prayer:

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak. (Col. 4:2-4; see also Eph. 6:19-20)

We should pray for our leaders' boldness, clarity, and consistency with the gospel message, and for opportunity for them to proclaim Christ. Healthy church members are devoted to prayer on behalf of their leaders. They heed Jesus' exhortation to pray and not give up (Luke 18:1), and they do that on behalf of their shepherds.

In our local church, a faithful band of members meets every Tuesday night for the purpose of praying for leadership. Weekly they solicit prayer requests and updates on previous requests. When they meet, they lift up all kinds of prayers for the personal, public, and ministry lives of the elders. God has produced great fruit in our body through their prayers.

## **SUPPORTS OUTSIDE MINISTRY AND INTERACTION OF LEADERS**

This is perhaps the least obvious of the actions that a healthy church member takes in following leadership. There is a great tendency among church members to be fairly possessive of their pastors—"he's *our* pastor." There are positive aspects to this possessiveness. It shows, for example, an open-hearted attachment to the shepherds.

However, this possessiveness can become selfishness if the congregation refuses to support a pastor's involvement in ministry outside the local congregation. The person most often hurt in such selfishness is the pastor himself, who, without outside stimulation and refreshment from fellow pastors and leaders, tends to dry and shrivel on the vine. A healthy church member contributes to a leader's ongoing health and vigor in the ministry by encouraging participation in outside conferences, speaking opportunities, and fellowship with other church leaders.

The Bible provides ample illustration of one congregation's support of another. A local church's generosity to other churches is commended in 2 Corinthians 9:13. And such generosity, when it takes the form of "loaning" a shepherd in ministry to others, hopefully expands the regions in which the gospel is proclaimed (2 Cor. 10:15-16). A healthy church member wants to see the gospel advanced and wants to contribute to the health of other congregations if possible. Supporting a leader's outside ministry is one way to fulfill this desire.

## ***Conclusion***

Leadership in the local church is established by God for the blessing of his people. However, for leadership to be effective, it needs to be encouraged and supported by the members of the church. Many faithful men have shipwrecked on the rocky shoals of incorrigible and resistant members. It ought not to be so among God's people. Rather, healthy members of a local church

should strive and encourage others to strive to follow their leaders with wide-open hearts, eager obedience, and joyful submission.

### ***For Further Reflection***

1. Consider the instruction to church members in Hebrews 13. In what way has submission to your church leaders brought you advantage or blessing?
2. In what specific ways can you pray for your leaders?
3. How can you encourage other church members to place greater trust in the church's leaders as they follow Christ and teach the word?

### ***For Further Reading***

Mahaney, C. J. *Humility: True Greatness*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005.

Sande, Ken. *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Conflict*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books Books, 2003.

## MARK 10

### **A HEALTHY CHURCH MEMBER IS A PRAYER WARRIOR**

**When I was a little boy**, we used to celebrate our friends' birthdays by giving them spankings, a wallop for each year of their birthday. And then we'd conclude with one extra lick, saying, "...and one to grow on." In keeping, the first nine chapters of this book correspond to the nine marks in its companion volumes, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* and *What Is a Healthy Church?* while this tenth chapter is "one to grow on."

I can't think of a single Christian I've met who did not believe that prayer is important, and not only important but a vital part of the Christian life. Odd indeed would be the Christian who attempts to live the Christian life without prayer.

But despite its universally accepted status, prayer remains for many Christians a difficult task, a duty without joy and sometimes seemingly without effect. Christians may waver between the poles of neglect and frustration when it comes to prayer.

Why should this be? Why should otherwise healthy Christians and members of churches find prayer such a difficult exercise?



## ***A House of Prayer for All People***

Difficulty in prayer becomes all the more disconcerting when we realize that the church is to be a place of prayer. The prophet Isaiah spoke of a time when eunuchs and foreigners would find a welcome home among the people of God. Those from nations outside of Israel would keep the covenant of God, and the Lord promised of these foreigners:

These I will bring to my holy mountain,  
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;  
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices  
will be accepted on my altar;  
For my house shall be called a house of prayer  
for all peoples. (Isa. 56:7)

The Lord Jesus quoted this promise when “he entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple,” reasserting that God’s house was no place for thieves but for people of prayer (Matt. 21:13; Mark 11:17).

When we survey the activities of the early church recorded for us in Scripture, we discover that one of the central things early church members devoted themselves to was prayer. As they awaited the promise of the Holy Spirit, they assembled in the upper room and “with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14). After Pentecost, when God added to their number those who were being saved, the earliest members of the Christian church “devoted themselves” to four things: “the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). The earliest Christians’ engagement in prayer was so strong it could only be called “devotion.”

As a spiritual discipline, prayer is so important that it’s the only devotion given as a reason for interrupting normal marital devotion between husband and wife (1 Cor. 7:5). Can you imagine the revival in spiritual lives that would break out if Christian bedrooms were to find spouses saying, “Not now, honey, let’s devote ourselves to prayer” instead of “Not now, honey, I have a headache.” From the home to the church, prayer is essential.

## ***What Is Prayer?***

But simply pointing out the importance and centrality of prayer in the early church does not make us prayer warriors. Not only that, we can often be confused as to what prayer really is. Wrong ideas abound. For example:

- Unless we pray, God cannot act in the world.
- God has already decided everything; he’s sovereign, so why pray?
- God is too busy to listen to my prayers.

At root, most misunderstandings about prayer stem from a misunderstanding about the nature of God and our relationship to him. It’s easy to turn prayer into a me-centered stage show where our claims and needs hog the spotlight and God is a stagehand changing the settings at our request. Yet it’s also easy to fall off the other side of the wagon by making God a cosmic chess player deterministically moving all the pieces without regard to the actions of his people.

What we need is a gospel-centered understanding of prayer. Theologian Graeme Goldsworthy offers this understanding:

The gospel is primarily about the work of the Son. How we know the Son will determine how we view our relationship with the Father who speaks to us through his word. How we view that relationship will determine, in turn, how we come to God in prayer and with what confidence. Prayer will never again be a sentimental excursion or an instinctive hitting of the panic button. Nor will it be the presumption of an innate right to demand God's attention. Rather it will be the expression of our entry into God's heavenly sanctuary, which has been procured for us by our Great High Priest.

Believing the gospel changes our status from outsiders to members of the family of God, adopted sons of God through faith in Christ. On this basis—our sonship through faith in Christ—we may speak to God as his redeemed children. “Prayer is our response to God as He speaks to us,” first in the gospel of Christ, and subsequently in his Word.

Prayer is “not pleading a cause before an unwilling God,” and neither is it acting as a surrogate for a god too impotent to effect anything without us. In prayer, as children united with Christ, our advocate and high priest, the heir of all things, we stand before God receiving a full hearing. Because we are before God in Christ, there is no ceiling that blocks our prayers, though we often imagine there is. Rather, “we involve ourselves in the business that God has with the world” by praying “towards the fulfillment of God’s revealed purposes for the whole universe” through “the gospel and its God-ordained outcome.” Prayer is “thinking God’s thoughts after Him”<sup>4</sup>—thoughts that will always be heard and answered.

### ***How and When Shall We Pray?***

A lot of books have been written on the subject of prayer. Some prescribe certain methods for prayer. Others examine the prayer lives of people in the Bible or great saints from church history. With so many books on prayer, and knowing how much progress I need to make in my own prayer life, I’m hesitant to offer suggestions for others to consider. But, in God’s kindness and mercy, he has told us how and when to pray.

The how and when of prayer boil down to two biblical teachings: pray constantly and pray in the Spirit.

#### **CONSTANTLY**

The apostle Paul frequently encouraged the churches to which he wrote to pray constantly. He exhorted the Thessalonians to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome to “be constant in prayer” (Rom. 12:12). And to the Colossians he wrote, “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving” (Col. 4:2). This was one way those in the Colossian church could set their minds on and “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (Col. 3:1–2). As an example, Paul held up Epaphras, who was “always struggling on your behalf in his prayers” (Col. 4:12). In view of the temptations, dangers, and needs of the Christian life, the healthy church member heeds God’s command for constancy in prayer.

## IN THE SPIRIT

Not only is the healthy church member constant in prayer, she or he also prays in the Spirit. “Praying in the Spirit” is variously understood by different Christian groups, and much confusion exists on this point. But, again, Paul’s letter to the Romans is helpful, where he writes: “The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom. 8:26–27).

The unfortunate result of so much speculation over a passage like Romans 8:26–27 is that the wonderfully encouraging and plain emphasis is overlooked. And there is great teaching here to encourage us in our prayers. Notice that the Spirit “helps us in our weakness.” We’ve already noted that prayer is one area where Christians readily admit their weakness.

How kind it is for God the Holy Spirit to help us in precisely this area! Ever find yourself at a loss for knowing what to pray? The Spirit himself intercedes for us. Ever wish you knew exactly what the will of God was so that you could ask for it? It is precisely “according to the will of God” that the Spirit intercedes for us.

All this is a pivotal clue for what it means to pray in the Spirit. Prayer in the Spirit is prayer *controlled* by the Spirit. And prayer controlled by the Spirit is prayer according to the will of God. It is when we pray in accord with God’s will, which is revealed in his Word, that we pray in the Spirit. Such prayer is the birthright of everyone born of the Spirit and adopted as sons of God (Rom. 8:14–17). It is by such prayer that we wage our warfare as Christians (Eph. 6:18).

### ***For What and for Whom Shall We Pray?***

As we saw in Romans 8:26–27, one of the ways the Spirit of God helps our weakness in prayer is by interceding for us when we do not know what to pray. Nevertheless, the Lord has also told us some things for which we should pray.

## PRAY FOR LABORERS AND SHEPHERDS

Matthew’s Gospel records for us an instance when Jesus was moved with compassion for the harassed and helpless people of Israel who appeared “like sheep without a shepherd.” Jesus immediately instructed his disciples to “pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Matt. 9:36–38). Perhaps only Christians who have been in churches that have suffered through prolonged periods without a pastor know the urgency of this prayer. The Lord’s people need shepherds, and healthy church members petition him to send shepherds to their churches and other churches in need of pastors. And not only do they pray that shepherds and laborers would be sent, they also pray that the Lord would help and strengthen those who labor in the Word during times of distress, suffering, and weakness (Phil. 1:19–20); grant boldness to pastors in proclaiming the gospel (Eph. 6:19–20); and grant opportunity for the spread of the ministry and the gospel (Col. 4:3–4).

## PRAY FOR ALL THE SAINTS

Praying for other Christians is a tangible expression of love and care (see Eph. 6:18). Christianity is not a solo sport, and prayer is not a trip through the Burger King drive-thru, where we shout into an inanimate receiver, wait a few moments, and then receive the bag of goodies we ordered to “have it our way.” The Christian life is a family life, and our prayers are to focus on the entire family, esteeming others more highly than ourselves. One way to do this is to pray regularly through your local church’s membership directory, if they publish one. Pray through one page or one letter of the alphabet per day. Another way of praying for all the saints is to pray for other churches in your neighborhood and churches where other family and friends are members. As we meet with the Lord to study his word each day, we can love other Christians by praying the truth of God’s Word over their lives each day. We can pray for their sanctification (1 Thess. 4:3); we can pray against temptation and for watchfulness (Matt.26:41); we can pray that they would be filled with the Spirit (Gal. 5:16–25) and nearly anything else the Bible commends for Christians.

### **PRAY FOR THOSE IN AUTHORITY**

The young pastor Timothy received these words from his mentor, the apostle Paul: “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (1 Tim. 2:1–3). Given that God ordains all authority in life, from government leaders (Rom. 13:1–2) to parents (Eph. 6:1–3), and given the blessings that God bestows on those who follow the authorities he has ordained, it makes sense that Christians should pray for those in authority. Healthy church members regularly remember in their prayers elected officials, government employees, school teachers, their own employers, parents, and others with authority. It’s helpful to keep a list of such persons in your Bible or your prayer journal as an organized reminder to pray for those in authority.

### **PRAY FOR THOSE WHO ABUSE AND PERSECUTE THEM**

This is the Lord’s charge: “Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Luke 6:28). It is natural to pray for people we love. Even unbelievers manage such “prayers.” But the love of Christ compels us to pray even for those who abuse, slander, and injure us (Matt. 5:46–47). Amazingly, such prayers give evidence that we are sons of God (Matt. 5:45), even as persecution for righteousness is cause for rejoicing because of Christ’s promised reward in his kingdom (Matt. 5:10–12). We’re not to be like the unmerciful servant, who, though forgiven by his creditor, roughly treated others who owed him (Matt. 18:21–35). We’re to fight the fleshly impulse to not love our persecutors and to neglect them in prayer, and we’re to choose instead the superior joy and righteousness of the sons of God who pray even for their abusers.

### ***Conclusion***

Can there be a more marvelous privilege than that which has been afforded to Christians through Christ: to stand before God our Father and respond in prayer by his Spirit to his Word spoken to us? If we would be expositional-listening, gospel-saturated, biblical theologians, we should pray

with the confident knowledge of what God is doing in the world through Christ his Son and pray for the worldwide advancement of his gospel and will.

### ***For Further Reflection***

1. Do you have a specific plan for prayer? Review your current plan or write a new plan for prayer that includes:
  - a) private and group/public times of prayer;
  - b) times and places of prayer;
  - c) specific individuals and groups of people to pray for;
  - d) gospel and church concerns;
  - e) passages of Scripture you find encouraging and helpful in prayer.

### ***For Further Reading***

Goldsworthy, Graeme. *Prayer and the Knowledge of God: What the Whole Bible Teaches*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003.

Mack, Wayne A. *Reaching the Ear of God: Praying More ... and More Like Jesus*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004.

Packer, J. I., and Carolyn Nystrom. *Praying: Finding Our Way Through Duty to Delight*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thabiti M. Anyabwile, [\*What Is a Healthy Church Member?\*](#), 9Marks (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 73–114.