

THEVILLAGECHURCH

Church Discipline Guidelines

Theology, Philosophy, and Practice

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Understanding Discipline	4
Context of Discipline	6
Purpose of Discipline	7
The Village Church Membership Covenant Provisions	11
Appendix 1	12
Conclusion	13
Pertinent Scripture	14

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Introduction: Discipline in Light of the Gospel

In the beginning, man and woman were created by God for His glory and for our greatest joy. By design, our greatest delight and truest satisfaction were to be found in trusting and treasuring God.

Though man was originally created good, the Scriptures reveal that he eventually and willingly rebelled against his Creator. Therefore, he has ever since suffered the consequences, condemnation and curses of what has been called “the fall.” This fall did not merely change mankind’s environment, but also his very essence. By this one original sin, the nature of humanity was altered, and we became sinners, natural enemies of God, predisposed to hate and rebel against Him. We were enslaved to the tyranny of sin and the death which it brings, and we were exposed to the just wrath of God.

Though man suppressed and exchanged true worship of the Creator for praise of created things, God’s plans to unite His glory and our joy were not thwarted at the fall. Rather, He has been patiently and purposefully working to restore what was broken. This restoration has been most clearly and fully revealed through the person and work of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. In the perfect obedience of His life, His death for our sins, and His resurrection, Christ introduced reconciliation into the world. Through treasuring and trusting in His finished work, we once again have relationship with our Creator.

Though we who believe have experienced true redemption and reconciliation, the fullness of our hope awaits us in the future. We are longing for the promise of Christ’s return, our resurrection and the restoration of creation. Until then, we still struggle with the residue of our old self, the flesh. This struggle is not to be lived out alone, but rather in the context of community, particularly the local church. We are called by God to watch out for ourselves and those whom we love lest we be enticed by the deceitful promises of sin. We will never truly love discipline until we hate sin.

Understanding Discipline

Love demands discipline. On a personal level, love for the Lord demands a response in which the desires of the flesh are slowly and methodically put to death. On the corporate level, love for the Lord and for His church requires a response in which sin is dealt with as God has intended. What loving parent would allow their child to play with fire? Would we expect anything different from our heavenly Father?

Colossians 1:28-29 Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all His energy that He powerfully works within me.

From this passage in Colossians we see that discipleship and the discipline through which it occurs is defined as maturity in Christ. This is accomplished primarily through teaching and warning. We might divide these two aspects of discipleship into two necessary components: those which are formative and those which are restorative. Formative discipline involves teaching, preaching, prayer, study, fasting and various other forms of engagement or abstinence to correct tendencies toward committing sins or omitting responsibilities in the Christian life. Restorative discipline occurs in the context of community and involves warnings, rebukes, exhortation and correction intending to prevent or to correct explicitly sinful or foolish expressions within the church. Both are a means of training us toward our goal of maturity in Christ. Neither personal formative discipline nor corporate restorative discipline are easy or necessarily enjoyable at the time. However, both are necessary for us to cultivate holiness. We must be trained by discipline in order to grow into maturity.

The Scriptures are full of wisdom regarding discipline. The writer of Hebrews teaches us that God's children are disciplined by Him in one form or another. Sometimes He sends tribulation and persecution or removes worldly comforts to foster humility, holiness and faith in us. Sometimes He disciplines through the work of the community of faith. It is this context of corporate discipline in the local church body with which this document is concerned. Therefore, the term "church discipline" will include the various steps of the community of faith coming alongside a professing believer to exhort, encourage, warn and rebuke him in loving hope for his or her restoration and movement toward Christian maturity.

Our hope, however, is that formative discipline through the work of the Holy Spirit will keep us from the need for the restorative forms. Regardless of the form, we will certainly be disciplined and God will use it to accomplish His loving purposes.

Hebrews 12:5-11 and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; 6FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES." 7It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we

not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? 10For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. 11All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

An Individual Calling

A significant part of the Christian life calls for the believer to be intentional, disciplined and self-controlled in seeking and submitting to the Lord through personal devotion and practice (cf. Galatians 5:22-23; 2 Timothy 1:7). However, our flesh is opposed to our desire for holiness (Galatians 5:16-17), and we must therefore be diligent to fight the flesh and walk by the Spirit (Romans 8:12-14) as children of God. By His grace, we can grow in our ability to live by faith through the Spirit's sanctifying work (1 Peter 1:2) as we relate to God and others through the realities of life.

A Corporate Calling

Given the deceitfulness of sin, all of us need the most basic level of church discipline that involves our brothers and sisters speaking truth in love to us (Ephesians 4:15, 29) because we are often blind to our own sinfulness (cf. Matthew 7:3-5). We need one another to believe and live out the gospel—this is God's design. Every church member is called to exercise their individual gifts to build up the body in love (1 Corinthians 12). Every member is called to labor and struggle with all energy to help one another in the church to grow in conformity to Christ (cf. Colossians 1:28-29).

Spiritual Warfare

Our call to live out the gospel takes place within the realm of spiritual warfare. The kingdom of evil is ever-present and always working against the kingdom of God. The difficulties we face in life are ultimately “not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). Our “adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8) and seeks to keep us living in fear and not by faith. Therefore, we need to love one another through encouragement, rebuke and correction since we are all prone to wander from our God.

The Context of Discipline

The situations addressed in this statement are those of explicit sin or foolishness. Far too often individuals and churches engage in the disciplinary process in situations where the issue is not explicitly sinful or foolish behavior. This must not be the case. However, we must not let the fact that some would misappropriate Scripture to distract us from our responsibility to apply it as the Lord has directed.

This distinction between dealing with issues of preference and those of sin is made explicit in the following passages:

Romans 14:10 But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. 13Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this--not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.

1 Corinthians 5:9-13 I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; 10I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. 11But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler--not even to eat with such a one. 12For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? 13But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.

While we will discuss the 1 Corinthians passage in more detail in a later section, it will suffice for now to notice the seeming contradiction in Paul's admonitions. In Romans 14, Paul writes that we should not judge our brothers. In 1 Corinthians 5, he writes that we should judge our brothers. Given that Scripture is not self-contradictory, we know that Paul's inspired interpretation of events must reflect differing circumstances.

The contexts of both passages clearly indicate that the situations are quite distinct. Romans 14 is dealing with principles of preference while 1 Corinthians 5 is dealing with that which has been clearly revealed as sin. This distinction must be maintained in the way in which individuals and churches interpret and apply Scripture today. Once again, the issues with which this document will be concerned are those of sin, not preference or conscience.¹ We are called to judge objective actions, not subjective attitudes and motivations. The latter is for the Lord to weigh and measure.

¹ An example to help flesh this out involves alcohol. Nowhere in the Scriptures is alcohol consumption deemed inherently sinful. Like the discussion of Romans 14, it is a matter of personal preference and conviction. As such, church discipline cannot and will not be enacted in the case of a believer who chooses to have an alcoholic beverage. However, if this believer drinks to the point of drunkenness, then the matter is no longer one of conscience, but is a clear violation of Scripture (Ephesians 5:18; 1 Corinthians 5:11; et al) and will therefore be dealt with accordingly.

The Purpose of Discipline

Why should the church engage in corporate discipline? Five reasons stand out as most pertinent:

1. We love the Lord
2. We love our members
3. We love His church
4. We love non-believers
5. We love the Scriptures

1. We love the Lord

Our God is a holy God whose eyes can look on no evil (Habakkuk 1:13). Though none of us will fully comprehend the Lord this side of glory, we recognize that our love for Him is informed by our understanding of who He is. We cannot love Him Whom we do not know. Part of the call to love God is to abhor that which is opposed to Him. Failure to fully appreciate the utter horror of sin is evidence of an incomplete understanding of the holiness of God.

Sin is a horrid thing. Through just one sin death, depravity, corruption and disease have reigned upon the earth for thousands of years. It always has devastating effects and all of us constantly live in that awareness.

As believers, we have great hope in no longer being enslaved to sin or its curse. We have been granted liberty through the free gift of God's grace. However, this liberty does not grant us license to sin. Rather, those who have tasted of the grace of God should be all the more adamant to oppose the sinful flesh. While we recognize that we will not see perfection until Christ returns, such acknowledgment should not lull us into an apathetic view of sin. It is still horrid and grotesque and has no place in the life of the believer.

The church must recover a healthy view of the holiness of God and our responsibility to flee from our natural passions and desires. We would do well to remember the many admonitions of Hebrews:

2:1 For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.

3:12 Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God.

4:1, 11 Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it...Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience.

10:26-31 For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27but a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES. 28Anyone

who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. 29How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? 30For we know Him who said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY" And again, "THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE." 31It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Being Reformed in our understanding of Scripture, we do not believe that any true believer can ultimately fall away from God's grace. However, we must also confess that there exists the very real possibility that some will find false assurance of salvation. This is surely terrifying.

These texts are not intended to relegate believers to perpetual fear, but rather to rouse the sluggish and undisciplined from their slumber. If a so-called believer is engaged in willful, persistent and unrepentant sin, the Scriptures say that his honest expectation should be judgment and punishment. That does not mean that he will receive such, for all true believers will ultimately persevere, but it does mean that he or she has no evidence upon which to base his or her claims of safety. Unrepentant sin in the believer must be dealt with by repentance. Failure to repent might be evidence of an unregenerate heart which is unable to turn from sin (Hebrews 12:15-17).

Love for God demands the discipline of holiness.

2. We love our members

The motivation behind church discipline should always be the hope of the restoration of the wayward brother or sister. Discipline is not the end, but rather is the means to the expected end of repentance and reconciliation in the life of the true believer.

James 5:19-20 My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, 20remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

In loving our brethren, we must remember to allow the Scriptures to define the means and manners of our love. While our culture might tell us that acceptance is love, the Scriptures are clear that true love calls to holiness and life through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

1 John 5:2 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments.

Attempting to love in a way that neglects Scripture not only evidences a lack of faith in Scripture and the Author of such Scripture, but also an ignorance as to the meaning of genuine love for the brother or sister. We must love in a way that is consistent with the biblical revelation.² The Lord

² The manner of love described in the Scriptures toward those involved in unrepentant sin will be expounded upon on pages 21-23.

created the method of church discipline as His intended means of sanctifying the church and her individual members. This is how He intends to sanctify His people and therefore failure on our part to carry out His desires is decidedly unloving.

Love for our members demands that we engage in discipline for their good and not let them sit idly in their sin and pretend as if nothing is wrong.

3. We love His church

Not only are we called to love our individual members, but also to love the whole assembly who gather together in the name of the Lord. To allow for unrepentant and persistent sin to leaven the congregation should certainly be a concern which drives and informs our decisions in church discipline.

1 Corinthians 5:1-13 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.

²And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

³For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. ⁴When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

⁶Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? ⁷Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ⁸Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

⁹I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— ¹⁰not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. ¹²For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."

Love for the church demands that we discipline ourselves for the sake of purity.

4. We love non-believers

Those who profess belief in Christ and yet continue in unrepentant sin misrepresent the nature of grace and the very faith that they claim. We want non-believers to know that the Christian faith does not merely gloss over hypocrisy and pretending. We take seriously the calls of our Lord.

Romans 6:1-4 What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

5. We love the Scriptures

As we will discuss in the following sections, the Lord has specifically revealed the method through which the church is expected to deal with sin in its body. Failing to obey God's commands is sin. We must be careful lest we ourselves fall into sin merely by allowing others to engage in it.

Psalm 119:9-16 How can a young man keep his way pure?

By guarding it according to your word.

¹⁰*With my whole heart I seek you;*

let me not wander from your commandments!

¹¹*I have stored up your word in my heart,*

that I might not sin against you.

¹²*Blessed are you, O LORD;*

teach me your statutes!

¹³*With my lips I declare*

all the rules of your mouth.

¹⁴*In the way of your testimonies I delight*

as much as in all riches.

¹⁵*I will meditate on your precepts*

and fix my eyes on your ways.

¹⁶*I will delight in your statutes;*

I will not forget your word.

2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

Love for the Scriptures demands that we discipline in accordance with its instructions.

The Village Church Membership Covenant Provisions:

Part of the membership process at The Village Church includes the signing of our membership covenant. This covenant outlines the respective responsibilities of elders and members toward the church body. Particularly relevant are the following responsibilities:

Elders' covenant:

- to care for the church and seek her growth in grace, truth and love ([Matthew 28:16-20](#); [Ephesians 4:15-16](#) [Colossians 1:28](#); [James 5:14](#); [1 Peter 5:1-4](#))
- to lovingly exercise discipline when necessary, for the glory of God, the good of the one disciplined and the health of the church as a whole ([Matthew 18:15-20](#); [1 Corinthians 5](#); [Galatians 6:1](#); [James 5:19-20](#)).

Members' covenant:

- to submit to the authority of the Scriptures as the final arbiter on all issues ([Psalm 119](#); [2 Timothy 3:14-17](#); [2 Peter 1:19-21](#))
- to submit to the discipline of God through His Holy Spirit by:
 - following the biblical procedures for church discipline where sin is evident in another -- the hope of such discipline being repentance and restoration
 - receiving righteous and loving discipline when approached biblically by fellow believers ([Psalm 141:5](#); [Matthew 18:15-20](#); [1 Corinthians 5:9-13](#); [Hebrews 12:5-11](#))
- to submit to the elders and other appointed leaders of the church and will be diligent to strive for unity and peace within the Church ([Ephesians 4:1-3](#); [Hebrews 13:17](#); [1 Peter 5:5](#)).

Given that these responsibilities in the Scriptures are applicable to all believers, The Village Church will reserve the right to exercise loving discipline outside of its official membership for those who regularly attend. The further a person is outside of the fold, the less biblical responsibility we will feel toward engaging them.

Appendix 1: The Steps & Dynamics of Church Discipline

Matthew 18:15-17	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Progressive, intensive steps of church discipline	<i>If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.</i>	<i>But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.</i>	<i>If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.</i>	<i>And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.</i>
Level of Church Discipline	Informal Discipline	Informal Discipline	Formal Discipline	Formal Discipline
Who is involved?	Only the persons directly involved.	Persons directly involved plus 1-2 others who can be biblically discerning and objective.	Those already involved plus church leadership. ³	The offender's community must be informed of the general nature of the offense and ways they can minister to those directly involved.
When should this step of church discipline occur?	Step 1 should be occurring everyday in gospel-driven communities and relationships.	Step 2 occurs when a person (or persons) refuses to listen and repent after being biblically approached according to the directions of Step 1.	Step 3 occurs when a person (or persons) refuses to listen despite the call to faith and repentance from 2 or more people.	Step 4 occurs when a person (or persons) refuses to listen despite the call to faith and repentance from church leaders and involved community through a variety of approaches and repeated attempts.
Step Details	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Examine your own actions and motivations and confess and repent if necessary. Prayerfully consider how to approach the person. Deal one-on-one as soon possible after an offense is recognized. Speak truth in love, give grace for the moment. Be humble, gentle and patient. Depending on the nature of the offense, you might try a variety of approaches and repeated attempts before proceeding to the next step. Avoid gossip and slander. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agree on 1-2 discerning and objective people who can understand the situation and help guide involved parties to live out the gospel by faith—perhaps a ministry leader or mutual friend. May be helpful to meet in a neutral location. Multiple meetings and a variety of approaches may be necessary to achieve incremental change. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Church leadership will investigate by meeting with those involved—listening and asking questions of the involved parties and those they brought into the situation. Community is crucial at this step—everyone involved needs to be kept updated so that sin can be exposed and the gospel can be ministered in a consistent and loving way. Multiple meetings and a variety of approaches may be necessary to achieve incremental change. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The unrepentant person is given a final warning, explaining the action taken with this last step of church discipline. The offender can no longer be affirmed as a believer in Christ. Excluded from communion. Excluded from groups such as homegroup, Bible studies and Recovery. Expelled from membership. May be asked to no longer attend weekly services, depending on the elders' discretion. Members are informed of offense and asked to not associate with the person as if nothing is wrong but to call the unrepentant person to faith and repentance in the gospel. Elders no longer have responsibility for the unrepentant soul—he is given over to the flesh, world and Satan.

³ Depending on the sphere of influence of the unwilling party, the step could involve as little as a few pastors to the entire church. This will be up to the elders' discretion.

Conclusion

The Village Church believes that the best way to deal with sin and love the sinner is through the means revealed in Scripture. Our desire to obey the Lord thus necessitates that we follow His Word.

Therefore, discipline in the life of The Village will follow the steps outlined in this document. Except in rather extreme and extenuating circumstances,⁴ the process should be followed with faithfulness and expectation of God's Spirit to work through His intended means.

Members of the church are expected to follow the biblical process of discipline as outlined. Therefore, the first step in instances of overt sin should be a private meeting to express concerns and correct any misunderstandings. We cannot stress strongly enough the need for confidentiality. A general principle of the discipline process is the need to "keep the circle of people involved in a conflict as small as possible for as long as possible."⁵

In the event that the sinning brother is unrepentant, members are encouraged to ask a witness to accompany him or her for another meeting. If this too fails, the member is then asked to contact a pastor at The Village for further instructions on the church's response. Functionally, the 3rd and 4th steps of the process will be carried out in the presence of two or more recognized pastors, at least one of whom being an elder.

While we never hope to need to arrive at these final steps, we fully believe that engaging in such is the best way to love a wayward brother or sister. Therefore, we will unapologetically obey the Scriptures as they apply in such instances. While such action may rail against our ideas of love and compassion, we trust that God will ultimately show Himself faithful and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

⁴ Situations of such a nature should be few and far between, though we recognize certain circumstances which would necessitate an interruption of the normal process. For example, an abused child would not have to privately confront his or her abuser in order to facilitate the first step of discipline.

⁵ Sande, Ken. *The Peacemaker*: Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 2007. Page 186.

Pertinent Scriptures

Matthew 18:15-17 *If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. 16But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. 17If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*

1 Corinthians 5:9-13 *I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. 11But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler--not even to eat with such a one. 12For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? 13But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.*

Galatians 6:1-2 *Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. 2Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*

2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15 *Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. 14If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame. 15Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.*

Luke 17:1-4 *Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. 2It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. 3So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. 4If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."*

James 5:19-20 *My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, 20remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*