

Wisdom For Life And Ministry

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.
(Proverbs 1:7 ESV)*

*Whoever heeds instruction is on the path to life, but he who rejects reproof leads others astray.
(Proverbs 10:17 ESV)*

*'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.'
(Job 28:28 ESV)*

*The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.
(Matthew 12:42 ESV)*

How to Give and Receive Correction

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Various Proverbs

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Introduction:

Good morning church. I'd like to invite you to open your Bibles with me to the Book of Proverbs.

Last week we talked about friendship. That was helpful, wasn't it?

We need each other. We live in a culture that is increasingly isolated and autonomous – and I'm not simply referring to the culture out *there*. I'm talking about the culture in *here*. By and large, North American Christians have become remarkably adept at keeping one another at arms-length. We can maintain friendships for years and years without ever having a difficult or meaningful conversation. That is a real problem.

One of the consequences of this deficiency is that many of us functionally have ONE authentic friendship – our spouse. I would argue that one of the reasons why so many marriages are in crisis today is because we never learned how to cultivate an authentic, meaningful, godly relationship before we got married. As a result, we find ourselves putting FAR too much stress and too many expectations on that one relationship. For many of us, our marriages represent the first and the only relationship in our lives that has ever forced us to have a difficult conversation or to deal with an uncomfortable disagreement.

That's dangerous. It's much easier to learn how to have hard talks with a friend that you won't be sharing a bed with at night. I would be so bold as to say that rediscovering biblical friendship – particularly rediscovering the art of giving and receiving correction – will bring about a full letter-grade improvement in our marriages.

I would also be so bold as to say that this illness, if left unaddressed, will lead to our ruin. Solomon warns:

Where there is no guidance, a people falls,
but in an abundance of counselors there is safety. (Proverbs 11:14 ESV)

We must commit ourselves to the hard work of establishing and maintaining a culture of accountability and correction in this church. Jesus COMMANDED us:

Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him (Luke 17:3 ESV)

How are you doing with that? When is the last time you lovingly but firmly rebuked a brother or sister in Christ? When is the last time that someone lovingly corrected you?

We need to get this right. By God's grace, I truly believe that we are growing in this as a church, but there is still room to grow. Amen? To that end, with the time that we have this morning, I want to take a very practical look at what the Bible has to say about how to give correction.

How to Give Correction

When correction is done well, it is lifegiving, isn't it? I will never forget the time that my mom gently rebuked me for a sin that I had allowed to fester in my life. I'll be that was a difficult thing for her to do, but it changed my life. I remember a time when a friend of mine sat me down, looked me in the eye and told me that I needed to grow in my resiliency. He had watched me freak out and self-destruct in anxiety too many times. Every time a new challenge came my way, I spiraled out of control again. But he loved me enough to call me on my sin.

Those difficult conversations made me who I am today. They were gifts for my soul.

None of those talks were easy. Choosing to correct someone is a very big risk, isn't it? That's part of the reason why it is so rarely done. But the testimony of the Bible is consistent: If we want to be a healthy and godly community of faith in here, then we need to do this, and we need to do it well. So, where do we begin?

1. **Make sure you have all the facts**

Don't bring a hard word unless you know the hard facts.

We could all share personal stories about the way that we have forever been impacted by words hastily spoken. Once you open your mouth and speak that correction, there's no bringing it back in. The Apostle James warned:

So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.
How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! (James 3:5 ESV)

Whoever said: "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me" is either a liar or a fool. Words matter. And often times words hurt. So, before we speak, we had better make sure that we truly understand the situation that we're speaking into.

This means that we need to take the time to ask good questions before we start bringing our opinions and corrections. Proverbs 18:2 says:

A fool takes no pleasure in understanding,
but only in expressing his opinion. (Proverbs 18:2 ESV)

Literally, every time I read this verse I come under conviction. I confess that I am often too quick to interject my opinion and to give my counsel. That has to change in me. If we are going to be good counsellors – good friends – in this place, then we are going to need to grow in our willingness and our ability to understand a matter before speaking.

That means that, before we correct a young mother for losing her temper with her children in the lobby, we take the time to find out the circumstances that have led her to the boiling point. That means that, before we rebuke the young man who has stopped attending the church, we ask the hard questions to discern what led to his retreat.

And here is a very practical application: Don't EVER rebuke a person based upon a rumor! That's not wisdom – that's foolishness. The Mosaic law contains this clear instruction:

A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established. (Deuteronomy 19:15 ESV)

In this social-media-shaped world that we are living in, we have to work hard to resist reacting to the rumor mill. Before we even CONSIDER bringing a word of correction, we need to be diligent in doing our homework.

Next, once you are sure that you have all of the facts:

2. Think twice, three times, and then maybe once more

Because sometimes the best thing to say is nothing at all. For a number of reasons. Let's think through some of those reasons this morning.

Maybe the offense that you are feeling is not the result of sin. Sometimes, once we've asked a few questions and spent some time in prayer we come to realize that the thing that has bothered us is actually not a sin issue but a personal preference issue. So, for example, is it my responsibility to rebuke everyone who does not share my musical preferences? What about my dress code? Traditions and personal preferences are not appropriate grounds for correction.

We also need to consider the extent of the sin that has been dealt to us. The Bible teaches us that there are some offenses which we really ought to overlook. For example, the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth:

To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong?
Why not rather be defrauded? (1 Corinthians 6:7 ESV)

Paul asks: "Why are you fighting about this? Why are you publicly defaming the gospel over this? Why not overlook this offense for the sake of your witness? Why not rather be wronged?"

Not every offense needs to be addressed. Not every offender needs to be confronted. If I find out that a friend of mine has shared something about me with others that might constitute gossip, should I rebuke him? Perhaps. Especially if he is a repeat offender. If I think this is a perpetual sin in his life that is going to lead him into ruin in the long run, I probably should confront him. But what if he's a first-time offender? What if this is completely contrary to his typical character and I know that he didn't mean it maliciously? It would probably be wise in that case to overlook the one-time offense.

When asking whether or not to address an offense, we also need to think about WHO we're dealing with. Proverbs 26:4-5 says:

Answer not a fool according to his folly,
lest you be like him yourself.
⁵ Answer a fool according to his folly,
lest he be wise in his own eyes. (Proverbs 26:4-5 ESV)

What do we do with that? Should we answer a fool? Should we not? The Bible says: Yes and no.

I love the nuance that is captured here! In these two verses, we are reminded that life is complicated and that there's not always a sure and a fast rule that you can apply to every situation. Sometimes, you are going to catch a fool saying foolish things and it is going to be your responsibility to answer him and to restore him. Yet, at other times, it is going to be your responsibility to walk away so as to avoid stooping to his own level. So, what's the principle here? It appears to me that we are supposed to ask the question: Is this person teachable? What kind of fool am I dealing with? Is this a fool who has been misguided but who would be open to correction? Or is this a fool who hates God and who is only looking to sling some mud?

The Apostle Paul picks up this principle when he writes to the Corinthians:

For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? (1 Corinthians 5:12 ESV)

Listen: It's not your job to go around rebuking fools who have no interest in living in obedience to God. It's not your job to police the outside world. It IS, however, your job to correct and restore those who would call themselves followers of Jesus Christ.

Once you have done our homework and once you have determined that some correction is necessary, you need to check your motives.

3. Check your motives

Sometimes we confuse "giving correction" with "unleashing our pent-up aggravation." These are not the same things. Solomon describes the wise counsellor as one who has a firm grip on his emotions:

A fool gives full vent to his spirit,
but a wise man quietly holds it back. (Proverbs 29:11 ESV)

There might be some people here today who *think* that they are wise when it comes to giving correction but who, in reality, have an anger problem. Yes, we are called to speak difficult truths to one another and yes,

we are called to rebuke a brother who has sinned against us, but the truth and the rebuke must always be delivered with LOVE. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians:

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. (Galatians 6:1 ESV)

Do you see that? There is no place for a vindictive spirit when it comes to restoration! There is no place for pride! Paul warns us to be CAREFUL when giving correction.

Because it is easy for us to get “puffed up” as we look at the sins of others. It’s easy to give vent to anger, wrath and malice under the guise of “correction”.

Keep watch on yourself.

Keep watch on your motives.

If there is anything other than love and a desire for restoration that is fueling your desire to confront someone, then you are not ready. Back up. Cool off. Pray, pray and pray. And when you are sure that your motives are in order:

4. Deal with people directly

Am I crazy, or are we BAD at this sometimes? How many of us have sent a text message in the heat of a confrontation? How many of us have tried to bring our rebuke by way of an e-mail? That is EMBARRASINGLY foolish. And, to my horror, I have done it!

Even worse than sending correction through technology is sending correction through another person. How many times has someone said: “Hey Linda, you’re close with Suzy, right? Well, I really think that someone needs to speak to Suzy about the behaviour of her children. They’ve been bullying my kids and running wild in the youth group. I’d talk to her, of course, but you know her so much better than I do. Maybe you could challenge her on the obvious lack of discipline in her home.”

Proverbs 26:6 says:

Whoever sends a message by the hand of a fool
cuts off his own feet and drinks violence. (Proverbs 26:6 ESV)

Why would you put an important message in the hands of a fool? Why wouldn’t you go right to the source? That is foolishness! That makes about as much sense as chopping your own feet off! Jesus said:

“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. (Matthew 18:15 ESV)

BETWEEN YOU AND HIM ALONE! Can you imagine how many conflicts would have been avoided if we as a people would simply listen to this one command? If you have a problem with Suzy’s parenting, then make sure you have all the facts, think once, twice and maybe once more, check your motives, and then go TALK

TO SUZY!

Let's be brave enough to do this, church. Let's be wise enough to do this. For the sake of our witness and for the glory of God, let's deal directly with one another and correct each other when necessary.

And before we move on, I think one last thing needs to be said:

5. **Get in and get out fast**

Let's be brave enough to go into the sewer to bring a brother out, but let's not live there. Jesus said:

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God. (Matthew 5:9 ESV)

Sometimes a peacemaker needs to address sin. Sometimes a peacemaker needs to confront and rebuke. But a peacemaker refuses to fall in love with conflict. We can fall into that ditch if we're not careful.

Address the sin. Speak the truth in love. Offer to be a support in the days ahead. Pray. And then move on. Let THAT be our practice as we give correction to one another.

Now, before we conclude this morning, I do want to take a moment to consider how we ought to behave when we are on the receiving end. Just as there is an art to giving correction, there is also an art to receiving correction, and whether you like it or not, you are almost certainly going to be on the receiving end at some point in your life. How do we do this well?

How to Receive Correction

The Book of Proverbs is clear on this point: The way in which you respond to correction says EVERYTHING about who you are. The fool will not – CAN NOT – receive correction. He will make excuses, respond with angry accusations or simply flee from the discipline EVERY TIME. Because he's certain he knows better. He's right in his own eyes every time. He's a fool.

But the one who is wise sees every rebuke as an opportunity to learn and to grow in godliness. He takes each rebuke to heart and carefully considers what has been shared with him. Proverbs 17:10 says:

A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding
than a hundred blows into a fool. (Proverbs 17:10 ESV)

So, if we want to be wise, then how should we receive correction? First:

1. **Be humble**

Sometimes it feels like the correction we've received is way off base. We start thinking of all of the reasons why we could NEVER be guilty of the thing that we've been accused of. Excuses mount. Resentment boils. But if we are wise, then we will lay down the excuses and resist the resentment. We will be humble enough to admit that we just might be wrong. Proverbs 12:15 says:

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes,
but a wise man listens to advice. (Proverbs 12:15 ESV)

Do you hear that? The one who is always right in his own eyes is a FOOL! Wisdom acknowledges that I make mistakes from time to time. I sin and fall short of the glory of God. I have blind spots. So, when someone comes to me and says: "I think this might be a blind spot in your life" I need to train myself to listen. Proverbs 18:13 says:

If one gives an answer before he hears,
it is his folly and shame. (Proverbs 18:13 ESV)

Is anyone else feeling a little convicted right now? This means that, when your wife says: "I feel like you haven't been helping out around the house lately" you shouldn't respond: "That's because I'm WORKING all day and I'm EXHAUSTED when I get home!"

Wisdom puts the excuses down. Wisdom listens. Wisdom says: "You're right. I've been a little checked out on the home front. Can you give me some specific examples on how I might be able to lighten the load?" And then wisdom listens again. Because the one who is wise believes what Proverbs 15:10 says:

There is severe discipline for him who forsakes the way;
whoever hates reproof will die. (Proverbs 15:10 ESV)

Do you hate reproof? Do you avoid correction? If you choose to go down that road, you need to know that it ends in death and destruction.

God would not only have you ENDURE correction. He calls us to SEEK IT OUT! Discipline and correction are a means of God's grace!

That's why we talk so much about church membership here. When you become a member you essentially say to the whole church: "I want you to come after me if I fall into a pit" and we say back to you: "Deal." Church membership is you saying: "I confess that I might act like a fool from time to time, but even when I'm foolish, I'm the kind of fool who welcomes correction. Please turn me back around when I'm wandering from the path."

Don't run from correction. Run TO IT! Cultivate friendships that demand growth and integrity. Put yourself under the authority of a church and invite them to speak into your life. That's humility. That's wisdom.

A little humility goes a long way.

Second, if you want to receive correction in a godly way:

2. Be responsive

It's one thing to say: "You know what friend, you might have a point." But it's another thing to say: "What should I do next? How can I put this into practice?" The one who is wise is humble enough to receive correction and is prudent enough to ACT upon it! Proverbs 10:17 says:

Whoever heeds instruction is on the path to life,
but he who rejects reproof leads others astray. (Proverbs 10:17 ESV)

Likewise, the Apostle James writes:

But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. (James 1:25 ESV)

We can't just be hearers. We must be doers! We must be responsive to the correction that we receive. The Christian life is a life of CONSTANT GROWTH. Not one of us in this room has arrived. Not one of us in this room is sinless. We all have blind spots. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18 ESV)

Notice that it doesn't say that we "have been transformed." God's sanctifying work in us is still a work in progress. We all ARE BEING transformed, and one of the primary instruments that God uses to do his transforming work in us is the Word wielded and applied by our brothers and sisters in Christ.

So, accept that gift. Invite God to use His people to speak into your life. Be responsive to Him as He reveals Himself to you.

And finally:

3. Be thankful!

Proverbs 9:8 says:

Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you;
reprove a wise man, and he will love you. (Proverbs 9:8 ESV)

Do you see that? When the fool gets rebuked, he makes excuses, gets angry, packs up his toys and finds a place to hide. But the one who is wise turns to the corrector and GIVES HIM A HUG! Because the one who is wise wants more than anything to live his life in a way that honors the Lord, and he knows that he's going to need every bit of help that he can get. The one who is wise agrees with Proverbs 25:12:

Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold
is a wise reprover to a listening ear. (Proverbs 25:12 ESV)

When is the last time that you THANKED someone for speaking a hard truth into your life? Do you see that person as an obstacle in your life? Or do you see them as more valuable than gold? The Bible tells us here that anyone who loves you enough to lovingly rebuke your sin is like a treasure! Hold onto them! Let them know how much you appreciate them.

One million years from now, when you are basking in the glory of God and enjoying the New Heavens and the New Earth, you aren't going to think twice about the conversations that you had about hockey, or fishing, or work. But I would bet that one million years from now you will still be thankful for the person who loved you enough to get into the mud and haul you off of the path of destruction. I bet you'll still be thankful for the friend who rebuked you before you ruined your marriage and the friend who corrected you before you strayed from the faith. I bet you'll be glad that you refused to settle for the autonomous, isolated lifestyle that was so prevalent in the culture and that you instead pressed in deep to the community of faith.

Can I issue a challenge to you this morning? I want to challenge you to approach a friend – a friend who is NOT your spouse – and I want you to ask them honestly if they see any areas of concern in your life. Go out for a coffee. Make time for a real conversation. And invite them to speak into your life. SEEK correction. CULTIVATE godly friendships.

If we can learn to do this well – if by God’s grace we grow in our ability to give and receive correction – then this will increasingly become a place of growth, blessing and safety.

Where there is no guidance, a people falls,
but in an abundance of counselors there is safety. (Proverbs 11:14 ESV)

Let this be increasingly true of us.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let’s pray together.