

The Air We Breathe

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2 ESV)

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. (Matthew 5:13 ESV)

Correction Avoidance

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2 Timothy 4:1-5

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Good morning, everyone, it is good to be with you all this morning. If you have a Bible with you would you please open it up to 2 Timothy 4:1-5. This morning is the final sermon in the “Air We Breathe” series that you have been working through over the last number of weeks, and I am thrilled to be able to be a part of this series. Pastor Levi has been bringing his sermons to the preaching workshop that Pastor Paul hosts on Wednesday afternoons over at Cornerstone and I have loved reading through his excellent work on this series. I have found this series to be wonderfully helpful. Pastor Levi has been accurately diagnosing many of the subtle assumptions and dispositions of our society that have been working their way into the Church. We can't help but breathe in the air around us and it is hard not to be changed by that air.

This morning we are looking at one of the attitudes of society that has infiltrated the Church and caused immense division and hurt amongst Christians: Correction Avoidance. A couple of weeks ago Pastor Levi talked about confrontation avoidance and this week we are looking at the flip side of that idea. Our natural tendency to avoid correction has plagued humanity ever since the fall but it has become easier than ever to drown out and ignore all corrective voices in our lives. We want to be confirmed in what we already believe. We don't want to be challenged or corrected. The problem is that it is only becoming easier and easier to avoid receiving correction. It is only becoming easier and easier to confirm what we already believe. It is altogether too easy to find someone to tell me exactly what I want to hear. And that is what the Paul told Timothy is going to happen. Let's turn our attention there now.

Here now the Word of the Lord beginning in 2 Timothy 4:1

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and

wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. 2 Timothy 4:1-5 ESV

This is the Word of the Lord; thanks be to God.

Here in this letter Paul is preparing Timothy for pastoral ministry and he warns Timothy that he must be committed to preaching the Word because there are going to be people who will wander away from the true preaching of God's Word in order to find teachers who will suit their own passions, teachers who will tell them whatever they want to hear.

If you have your Bibles open in front of you, I want you to look back just two verses before the beginning of our text this morning to 2 Timothy 3:16-17. These are verses that we are pretty familiar with, they read

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

So, Paul instructs Timothy to be ready in season and out of season, to be ready at all time, to preach the Word of God which is profitable for REPROOF, CORRECTION, and TRAINING IN RIGHTEOUSNESS. And we see this same emphasis repeated in chapter 4 verse 2 where Timothy is instructed to reprove, rebuke, and exhort his congregation.

The problem is that our default inclination is to resist this kind of teaching. We don't want to be reproved and corrected, we don't want to be rebuked, we don't want to be encouraged to change and grow. We want to be told that we are perfect just the way we are, we want to believe that we've been right all along, we want to avoid correction at all costs.

Which leaves us with the question of WHY? Why do we avoid correction?

Why do we avoid correction?

There are numerous reasons why we avoid correction so passionately but this morning I want to highlight Four. The first reason that we avoid correction is:

1. 1. Because we are all idolaters at heart.

This comes right out of our text this morning in verses 3-4. Look there in your Bibles with me. We read

For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. 2 Timothy 4:3-4

Rather than sit under teaching that corrects our biases and assumptions we will seek out those teachers who have the same passions and preferences as we do. We saw this clearly over the course of the

COVID-19 pandemic. The number of Christians who switched churches over the last three years because they sought to find a teacher who preached what they believed about Covid is alarming.

And that is just one example.

It doesn't take long for us to think of many other examples of people leaving churches, of people leaving a Bible preaching Church to go to sit under the teaching of someone who will tell them what they want to hear; whether it be about Covid-19, human sexuality, worship style, you name it.

John Calvin famously said in the Institutes that "The human heart is a perpetual idol factory" And that is what is going on here. We consistently elevate our preferences, opinions, and beliefs to a place of idolatry. We cling so desperately to these idols that rather than entertain the idea that we might be wrong, or listen to opposing views with an open mind, we run away from any sort of corrective voice.

I love the way Donald Guthrie highlights the flaw in this approach. He says:

"Those with no more serious intentions than to satisfy their own desires will not only lack sufficient discernment to differentiate between *truth* and *myths*, but will, in fact, *turn their ears away from the truth*, which suggests a refusal to hear it."¹

The problem is that when our desires, our preferences, our biases become the top priority than we end up in a place where we do turn away from the truth in order to hear what we want.

That is what Paul is highlighting in this Letter to Timothy. The fact that people care so much about their personal interests, their hobby horses, their own biases and opinions that they are unwilling to submit those things to the Word of God. Someone driving around town with a flag cussing out Justin Trudeau is going to have a very hard time submitting to a verse like 1 Peter 3:17 where we are told in no uncertain terms to "honour the emperor".

Look, we all have our biases and our preferences. We all have things that we are passionate about. The problem is when we elevate these things to where they become the most important, when we make idols out of them. They need to be held in submission to God and to his Word.

Unfortunately, our biases and desires often aren't in line with the Word of God and so we need to let go of them and be changed by God's word, yet we care more about these personal preferences and opinions than we do about the Word of God. So, we avoid correction.

The second reason that we avoid correction is:

¹ Donald Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 14, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 186.

2. 2. Because we forget who we are.

This is an extension of the first point in that when we elevate our preferences and opinions above the Word of God, when we make idols out of them, we begin to lose sight of who we are.

Consider what the Bible says in Proverbs 16:2

All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirit. Proverbs 16:2 ESV
We often like to think that we are rational beings; that if we are presented with a choice, we consider all the variables and carefully come to a logical and rational conclusion. This is far from the truth.

In Jonathan Haidt's book *The Righteous Mind* he describes our use of reason not as a way of coming to rational decision but rather he describes it as a press secretary. We actually make snap decisions and then use reason to come up with a way to justify those snap decisions to ourselves and to others. We use reason to make ourselves look good.

Because we need to.

Because we forget who we are and have overidentified with our opinions and preferences.

We lose sight of the fact that this world is not our home, that we have been bought with the blood of Christ and we are now citizens of Heaven. And when we do that, we naturally over identify ourselves with our opinions so we use reason to justify and defend these opinions for all its worth in order to protect our sense of self worth.

And because of this natural, fallen process that occurs in all of us. We avoid correction at all costs. We don't want to put ourselves in a position where we are being told that we are wrong, where we might be told that we have fallen short, where we receive rebuke, correction, and encouragement to grow.

See, if my identity isn't in my hobbies, my opinions, or my political views, if I realize that I belong to Christ then the truth is not a burden but a blessing. If my identity is in the one who paid the penalty for my sins upon the cross and has purchased me with his blood, then I am able to consider trials and tribulations, corrections and rebukes to be a blessing because they help to make me more like him.

When I remember WHO I AM, then I am able to see that becoming more like Christ, being changed and molded into the image of God is far more important and far more valuable than holding on so tightly to my opinions and beliefs.

We need to be who remember who we are, because if we forget, it will naturally lead to us avoiding correction.

Which leads to the third reason we avoid correction and that is simply:

3. 3. Because receiving correction is hard.

This is the simplest of the three reasons. It essentially preaches itself. But consider for a moment what Hebrews 12 says

And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? “My son do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. Hebrews 12:5-6 ESV

The Lord disciplines, chastises, reproves, and corrects his children yet there is a reason the Bible needs to remind us not to be weary of the Lord’s correction.

Because we do get weary.

Because it is not always easy, in fact it is almost always hard.

It isn’t natural for people to receive correction joyfully. I don’t imagine any 2 year old has ever thanked their parents for putting them on a time out.

A couple of weeks ago Pastor Levi talked about how we have a tendency to avoid confrontation.

Although the Bible tells us we need to be willing to correct and confront one another when necessary, we often avoid doing it and I think a large part of that is because it is often so poorly received. We are afraid to correct one another because we usually do not receive correction well.

We get defensive, we lash out in anger and hurt. Because it is painful. It is hard to hear that you have done something wrong or that you may have come to the wrong conclusion on the matter. That’s not easy to hear.

What is easy is to ignore all corrective voices in your life. It is easy to put yourself in a position where you are only hearing voices that affirm your thoughts and actions.

And that is easier now more than ever.

Sure, I can go to church once a week and maybe the pastor might say some challenging or convicting things. But then I can go home and listen to various podcasts, YouTube videos, sermons or read blogs that will ease any sense of correction or conviction I am feeling. I can go and listen to countless hours of people telling me what I already believe.

The Internet has made it unbelievably easy to do exactly what Paul warns Timothy is going to happen. The Internet makes it easy to find teachers who suit our own passions and desires.

And not only that, but it is actually designed to be an echo chamber. Often people refer to the internet as a mere tool. Something that can be used for good or for bad, it is simply a thing like a hammer or screwdriver. The problem is that my hammer doesn't care whether I use it or not.

The Internet does. It has a motive. Websites make money off of people clicking their links and viewing their webpages. If you are interested in crocheting, and look at things about crocheting then you will see more and more things about crocheting. If you believe the Earth is flat and listen to YouTube videos about it then you will see more and more videos telling you that the Earth is flat.

The Internet functions as a giant echo chamber and a confirmation bias machine. It is altogether too easy to do as the Apostle Paul warns and turn away from listening to truth and wander off into myths.

It is far easier and far less painful to surround ourselves with voices telling us exactly what we want to hear. It is easier to be told that we are right than to be told that we are wrong.

Which leads to our fourth and final reason we avoid correction.

4. 4. Because we forget we need it.

Human beings are self-justification machines. Our initial response to almost any situation is to justify and defend ourselves. We have already seen this morning that we use reason as a tool for this exact purpose. I think we are all aware of this at some level or another. This is the reason we often resort to shifting the blame onto others. This is the reason we jump to defending ourselves or lashing out at the person who gives us any criticism.

We have this innate sinful nature to defend and justify our actions to ourselves and this tendency blinds us to our need for correction.

And we sorely need correction.

I don't think I need to belabour this point too much. The Bible is explicitly clear that we have all sinned and fallen short of God's perfect standard. Romans 3:23 says that exact thing

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Romans 3:23 ESV

Psalms 53 reminds us that no one does good. Jeremiah 17:9 tells us that

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? Jeremiah 17:9 ESV

We have broken compasses and if we are left to our own devices, we will follow our broken, misguided hearts straight down the path to Hell.

We need correction.

We need a voice telling us that we are on the wrong path. That we are chasing after the wrong things.

Correction truly is a gift from God. It is his way of shepherding us like the dumb lost sheep we are. We cannot be left to surround ourselves with people telling us that we are all good that we're right. We need to be corrected and reminded of what is true, time and time again.

Which is what we also see in our text this morning. God provides us with loving wise correction.

Which leads to our final question:

How does God Correct us?

The first way that God corrects is clear to see in the text this morning. God corrects us:

1. 1. With his Word

We see this clearly in verses 1 and 2 of 2 Timothy 4. Paul begins this chapter by charging Timothy

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. 2 Timothy 4:1-2 ESV

Preach the Word.

Paul's instruction here, knowing the hearts of people, knowing that people are prone to wander away from truth and correction is simply to preach the Word of God. We already saw this morning how this is building off of 2 Timothy 3:16 where Paul reminds us that all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and for training in righteousness.

The Word of God is THE STANDARD for correction.

I remember a time when I was framing condos for my dad's company and my coworkers were telling me about a time when one of my brothers in law was working with them and they had built some walls on the ground and were standing them up. As they stand them up they nail braces onto the walls to hold them level or plumb. Well, my brother-in-law, rather than using the level, looked out beyond the wall at a light post and lined the wall up with that, assuming the light post was level.

But when he stepped back from the wall it had a huge lean on it because the light post wasn't anywhere close to level.

That is what it is like when we try to use anything else but the Word of God as a standard by which to judge whether we're right or wrong. It may seem good from where we were standing but proper perspective will show that we are way out of line.

We need the Word of God to correct us and guide us. It is gift from God that he has chosen to speak to us through his Word. To give us a written form of his revealed truth to us. We need to be people of the Word. People who are immersed in it, people who are reading it daily, listening to it faithfully preached and explained, people who are open and willing to receive the truth that is spoken in God's word and to be changed by it.

Because the Word of God is the primary way that God uses to lovingly correct and guide his people. All other ways that God corrects us ought to be inline with the truth of his Word.

Which leads us to the second way that God corrects us:

2. 2. With pastors and elders

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus are called the "pastoral epistles" because, in these books, Paul is instructing Timothy and Titus on what it means to be a pastor and elder in the Church. Remember that the Bible doesn't really differentiate between pastors and elders. The point is that Pastors and Elders are called to shepherd the flock of God's people. As Paul reminds Timothy here in verse 2

preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. 2 Timothy 4:2 ESV

Notice the four instructions in this verse. Preach the Word, reprove, rebuke, and exhort. That is a brief summary of what pastors and elders are to do. They are responsible for the preaching of the Word in your church. They are responsible for reproving and rebuking sin in the congregation. And they are to exhort and encourage you to live in a way that honours and glorifies God. Yet I love the qualifier that Paul adds, "with complete patience and teaching". Your pastor and elders are to be under shepherds of Jesus Christ, the good and perfect shepherd, they are to lead, guide, and correct you with the Love that Christ himself has for you.

I love the way that the apostle Peter puts it in 1 Peter 5. He writes

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. 1 Peter 5:1-4 ESV

God has given you a gift of Godly men who care deeply for you and for your souls. Men who have been charged to oversee this body of believers and to shepherd them well. Sometimes that shepherding takes the form of difficult conversations and rebukes. ALWAYS it takes the form of lovingly and faithfully

preaching the Word of God that everyone here, pastor and elders included, should be challenged, corrected, and transformed by God's word.

Zion helpfully highlighted our natural aversion and disdain for submitting to authority. He pointed out our need for such authority and God's graciousness in giving us pastors and elders. God recognizes our wandering hearts and he has placed good Godly men in this church to guide you and correct you for your benefit and for the Glory of God.

Thirdly, and finally, God corrects us:

3. 3. With Christian friendship

This point is not as explicitly clear in the text, but it is implicit in the fact that God has chosen to inspire the writing of this letter from Paul to Timothy with his Holy Spirit and chosen to speak to all of us through Paul. This is a letter written to an individual person, but its God's wisdom and inspiration it has also been written for the benefit of the Church.

As Paul reminds us in 1st Corinthians 12

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 1 Corinthians 12:12 ESV

So we are one body, and as one body, we are called to hold each other accountable to the Word of God as well.

Often, our brothers and sisters are the way that God decides to correct and reprove us. This typically takes the form of close Christian friendship. Proverbs tells us:

Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another. Proverbs 27:17 ESV

Now I don't know if you have ever seen the way a blacksmith sharpens a sword or knife, but it doesn't look very pleasant for the knife. It usually involves a lot of sparks and literal bits of metal burning away to leave a sharp and useful tool behind.

And the same way it is for us, it is often painful, it is often difficult. It can be difficult to give correction as Pastor Levi pointed out, and it can be difficult to receive correction as we saw already this morning. It is a hard process, but that is the benefit of Christian Friendship as Proverbs also reminds us:

Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy Proverbs 27:6 ESV

It is better to have close Christian friends who know you and love you enough to speak the hard truths to you than to surround yourself with people who will flatter you and tell you what you want to hear.

We need Christian friendship. We need people with which we can have real conversations. Not just people who we talk to about what TV shows we are watching. We need people who we can be vulnerable with. We need people who are in the trenches with us, fighting the same fight, striving to grow into the same image, people who will lift us up as we stumble. People who will speak the truth we need to hear.

Receiving correction is a difficult process but well worth the pain, as the apostle James reminds us

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. James 5:19-20 ESV

God cares deeply about our Holiness, and he has provided wonderful tools and resources that he uses for our correction. All correction starts and ends with God's Word and should be shaped and guided by God's truth. God has given us pastors and elders to oversee us and to be examples for us that we might imitate them as they imitate Christ and that we might submit to their leadership, guidance, and correction. And God has given us Christian friends who are striving with us towards the same goal of be transformed day by day into the image of Christ that we might Glorify God in all that we do.

So let us resolve to be people of the Word,

Let us resolve to love another to speak the truth in love,

Let us resolve to receive correction well,

That we might be salt and light for the Glory of God.

Let's pray together.