

The Benefit of Loving Rebuke

5 of 9 in *Navigating Relationships: Wisdom from the Book of Proverbs*

August 18, 2024

Proverbs 27:6, 17, etc.

I'm sure it won't surprise you to learn that we pastors sometimes receive critical feedback from congregants about this or that aspect of our personal ministry, or the church's ministries. We endeavour to be open to the truth contained in such feedback, and to engage humbly and constructively with those who bring their concerns to our attention. After all, it can take some courage to share your critical feedback with a pastor, or with others in church leadership, and we want to honour that by listening well and giving genuine consideration to what is being said. Indeed, what you share may very well be something that's important for us to be aware of and to learn from.

In most cases, sharing your honest concerns directly with the appropriate person or persons is better than bottling them up inside, and it's definitely always better than venting your complaints sideways to everyone else.

But on occasion, we pastors will receive an *anonymous* note of complaint. What's the common wisdom for dealing with anonymous complaints? *Ignore them*. If someone is not willing to let you know who they are, they are clearly not interested in constructive dialogue, so their complaint is probably not worth heeding.

I once heard a story about a pastor who received an anonymous note with nothing but the word "FOOL!" written on it. This pastor, who apparently had a keen sense of wit, commented that, "I've gotten many notes without signatures before, but this is the first time I got one where someone forgot to write the note and just signed their name!"

We're continuing in a series in the book of Proverbs about the wisdom we need for navigating relationships. And speaking of fools, Proverbs frequently warns us against becoming fools— especially when it comes to our willingness to humbly receive instruction, correction and rebuke from others. For example, in Proverbs 12, it says:

Fools think their own way is right,
but the wise listen to others. ¹

And in Proverbs 15 and 17, we read that:

Only a fool despises a parent's discipline;
whoever learns from correction is wise.

A single rebuke does more for a person of understanding
than a hundred lashes on the back of a fool. ²

Tim Keller talks about how in Proverbs, those considered to be fools are often *obstinate* people. ³
What's an obstinate person?

¹ Proverbs 12:15 (NLT)

² Proverbs 15:5; 17:10 (NLT)

³ From Keller's sermon, *Wisdom: What Is It?* <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/wisdom-what-is-it/>

An obstinate person is someone who is wise in their own eyes— someone who in their insecurity needs to be right all the time— someone who is self-righteous, stubborn, and full of pride. They don't listen well to others, are hard to teach, get their back up when challenged, and despise correction.

Here's an uncomfortable question that each of us needs to ask of ourselves:

Do I have any obstinate tendencies?

However you respond to that question, I think we can all agree that we don't want our lives to end up indelibly marked by obstinance, which according to Proverbs, makes us fools. Of course, the opposite of foolishness, according to Proverbs, is what? It's *wisdom*.

This series is all about how we need God's wisdom to navigate relationships in this fallen world. Because on the one hand, God has created us for loving relationships. Relationships bring much-needed joy, meaning and support to our lives. But as sinners, we are all too aware that relationships can easily break down, bringing confusion, frustration and hurt.

Proverbs is the Bible's premiere book of wisdom, and biblical wisdom is all about having *competence in dealing with life's complex realities*. You'll be hard-pressed to name many realities more complex than human relationships— and that certainly includes the relational wisdom involved in both receiving and giving the kind of loving correction or rebuke that we all need from time to time.

Loving rebuke— that's the subject we're going to talk about today. Specifically, we're going to consider:

- The goal of loving rebuke
- The importance of receiving loving rebuke
- The importance of giving loving rebuke
- The heart of loving rebuke

We begin with:

1. The goal of loving rebuke (or *correction, discipline, counsel, instruction*).

Note that when I speak of rebuke, I'm also including other related phrases that are frequently mentioned in the book of Proverbs— things like correction, discipline, wise counsel and instruction. All of these words combine to form something of a thematic cluster in Proverbs.

It's important to understand that the goal of loving rebuke is not rebuke. Rebuke—along with correction, discipline, counsel and instruction— is always a *means to an end*, never an end in itself.

The goal and motivation of loving rebuke must always be to benefit the well-being of others, including their growth in godly character. Proverbs 10 puts it this way:

People who accept discipline are on the pathway to life,
but those who ignore correction will go astray. ⁴

⁴ Proverbs 10:17 (NLT)

The overarching goal of loving rebuke must always be to put people on the pathway to life!

Proverbs 27 expresses this idea as follows:

As iron sharpens iron,
so one person sharpens another. ⁵

Just as there is mutual benefit in rubbing two iron blades together so that their edges become sharper and more efficient in their intended purpose— to cut and slice— we too need to be sharpening each another through the fellowship we share in Christ.

By mutually exhorting each other with God’s Word— which itself is referred to as a “double-edged sword” ⁶ — we sharpen each other so that we might better fulfill our respective callings and God-given purposes in life. Yes, sparks can fly when we sharpen each other as iron sharpens iron, but without such relational sharpening, we grow dull and become ineffective in life and ministry, like a blunt knife.

The invitation here is to prioritize cultivating relationships of trust in which we can mutually exhort, admonish, and encourage each other. How is God asking you to pray for, pursue, and lean into such relationships?

If the main goal of loving rebuke, correction, discipline, wise counsel and instruction is to put people on the pathway to life, what happens when rebuke is needed because someone is caught up in sin or error? The goal of such rebuke must always be restoration. For example, in Galatians 6, Paul writes:

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. ⁷

And in 2 Corinthians, Paul explicitly states to a group of church people who needed correction that:

... our prayer is that you may be fully restored. This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority— the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down. ⁸

Paul sums it up well. The goal and motivation of loving rebuke is always to build up; never to tear down.

The goal of loving rebuke is never to win an argument or put someone in their place. It should only ever be done with the goal of helping other enter more fully onto God’s pathway of life.

Next, let’s talk about:

2. The importance of receiving loving rebuke.

When was the last time someone rebuked, corrected or disciplined you? How did you respond?

⁵ Proverbs 27:7 (NIV)

⁶ Hebrews 4:12

⁷ Galatians 6:1 (NIV)

⁸ 2 Corinthians 13:9b - 10 (NIV)

When someone confronts or challenges you about your attitudes or behaviours, it's easy to respond by getting defensive and firing back. Or to withdraw and crumble into self-pity.

But one of the most prominent themes in Proverbs is that loving rebuke— when it's addressed to us in the right way and for the right reasons— is something we must learn to desire deeply, and even pursue. Proverbs 3 says:

My child, don't reject the Lord's discipline,
and don't be upset when he corrects you. ⁹

The question is, how does the Lord's discipline come to us? The Lord's discipline often comes to us in the form of loving challenge or correction from another brother or sister in Christ. As such, accepting and embracing such reproof is an essential means of living in the "fear of the Lord" which Proverbs says is *the* key to growing in wisdom.

We've talked about the fear of the Lord throughout this series. Remember, it's less about being afraid of God and more about having a posture of humility before God, actively seeking God as the ultimate source of competence to navigate life's complex realities. Therefore, in order to gain the wisdom we need to navigate the complexities of our relationships with other people, we must lean, first and foremost, into our relationship with the Lord, who alone is all wisdom.

Having said this, it's vital to realize that the Lord often imparts his wisdom to us— including his loving rebuke, correction and discipline— *through other people*. It might come through a personal conversation with a trusted Christian friend, pastor or counselor. It might come through a parent. It might come through a sermon such as this. But we need to open ourselves to the fact that God often corrects and disciplines us through other people.

Accordingly, in Proverbs, you'll find a staggering number of warnings against dismissing or rejecting loving rebuke. Equally astounding are the promises of blessing for those who accept and embrace loving rebuke. Let's allow the book of Proverbs speak for itself in this regard by reading a handful of these warnings and promises.

Would you open your hands in a receptive posture? Pay attention to how God is speaking and moving within you as I read these sacred texts. What's God's invitation to you as you hear these Proverbs?

Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge,
but whoever hates correction is stupid. ¹⁰

Whoever disregards discipline comes to poverty and shame,
but whoever heeds correction is honored. ¹¹

Whoever heeds life-giving correction
will be at home among the wise.

⁹ Proverbs 3:11 (NLT)

¹⁰ Proverbs 12:1 (NIV)

¹¹ Proverbs 13:18 (NIV)

Those who disregard discipline despise themselves,
but the one who heeds correction gains understanding.¹²

Stern discipline awaits anyone who leaves the path;
the one who hates correction will die.
Death and Destruction lie open before the Lord—
how much more do human hearts!
Mockers resent correction,
so they avoid the wise.¹³

Apply your heart to instruction
and your ears to words of knowledge.

Whoever remains stiff-necked after many rebukes
will suddenly be destroyed— without remedy.¹⁴

How did God speak into your heart as you listened to his sacred word? Did you hear any invitations or challenges from the Lord?

It's one thing to accept loving rebuke when it comes your way, but it's quite another thing to seek it out. And yet, Proverbs so clearly places such a high value on correction, discipline, counsel and instruction that we should do more than just wait for these things to come to us. We should actually pursue them. How do we do that?

Well, one practical way to go about it is to sit down with someone you trust, and ask them this question:

What's it like to be on the other side of me?

Don't just ask this of anyone. Ask this of those who know you well, and who love, care for, and want the best for you. Ideally, they should be people who walk with the Lord. And when they respond to your question, just listen, and thank them for sharing. If they bring up something you need to apologize for, do so humbly and simply, without multiplying words. Then take what they shared, and bring it to God. Pray over it. Is there something God wants you to learn about yourself? Is there some growth edge God is bringing to your attention through this person's loving rebuke? Discern what God would have you do from there, and let him lead you more fully onto his pathway of life.

Earlier this year, someone I trust and respect invited me to have a conversation in which they shared a word of loving rebuke with me. It wasn't easy to hear—no rebuke ever is— but I knew this person valued and wanted the best for our relationship, was speaking to me out of love and concern, and had prayed a lot over our conversation. In fact, this person had to summon up a lot of courage to confront me. They were sacrificing their comfort and taking a risk to do so. Therefore, challenging as the moment was for me, it was something I needed to welcome and thank God for.

¹² Proverbs 15:31-32 (NIV)

¹³ Proverbs 15:10-12 (NIV)

¹⁴ Proverbs 23:12; 29:1 (NIV)

Indeed, I did learn things about myself and my leadership through that conversation— some blind spots about some less-than-constructive impact I was having on some others that I had not fully appreciated. The conversation was a gift that enabled me to see things about myself that I needed to own and change. It also helped to strengthen my relationship with the person who confronted me.

Are you becoming convinced of the importance of being open to receive loving rebuke from another person? It's one of the ways that our loving Lord disciplines us for our own sake, and for the sake of our relationships. With this in mind, let us say with the psalmist (indeed, please read this verse aloud together):

Let the godly strike me!
It will be a kindness!
If they correct me, it is soothing medicine.
Don't let me refuse it. ¹⁵

Before we move on to the next point, allow me to offer a brief but important qualifier. Raise your hand if you've ever heard the cliché *there's a grain of truth in every criticism*. It's usually spoken as an encouragement to look for some truth in every criticism we face. The thing is, not *every* criticism you receive has truth in it. Some criticisms do, and if we're wise, we'll be open to and learn and change as the result of the loving rebukes we receive that are grounded in substance. But the cliché that every criticism contains a grain of truth is unhelpful, because it gives all the power to the critic, and it disempowers the one being criticized. It's important to appreciate that some criticism is not grounded in reality, so to look for so-called "grains of truth" where there are none is poor stewardship of our time and energy.

For example, if we afforded equal weight to every criticism that has been levied against Cornerstone, we would never have become the church that God has called us to be and become.

Therefore, it's especially important to consider who it is that's rebuking you. Is the person a trusted, friend, family member, or spiritual leader? Do they have a walk with God that you can trust? Do they have your best interests at heart? Do they truly desire to see you walk more fully on God's pathway of life? Do they know you well enough to have earned the right-of-way to speak into your life?

Questions along these lines are good to ask not only when it comes to receiving loving rebuke, but also when it comes to:

3. The importance of giving loving rebuke.

That is to say, before you rebuke or correct someone else, you need to prayerfully ask yourself questions such as these:

- Do I have this person's trust, more or less?
- How is my own walk with God?
- Do I truly have this person's best interests at heart? Is my honest goal and motivation to lead them more fully onto God's path of life?
- Have I earned the right-of-way to speak into their life?

¹⁵ Psalm 141:5 (NLT)

- Am I willing to prepare carefully and prayerfully for the encounter?
- Does the person have the capacity or the character to receive a rebuke from me, however lovingly I may approach it?
- For love's sake, am I willing to accept the awkwardness and relational strain that can result from rebuking someone? Have I counted the potential costs?

While we must always approach it with nuanced wisdom, scripture nonetheless makes it clear that from time to time, God will call upon us to faithfully carry out the ministry of rebuke. To do so, says Proverbs, is to be a true friend:

Better is open rebuke
than hidden love.
Wounds from a friend can be trusted,
but an enemy multiplies kisses. ¹⁶

In Proverbs, we also see that the potential upside of giving loving rebuke is sky-high. Indeed:

... rebuke the discerning, and they will gain knowledge.

Like an earring of gold or an ornament of fine gold
is the rebuke of a wise judge to a listening ear. ¹⁷

Whoever rebukes a person will in the end gain favor... ¹⁸

When we do give a word of loving rebuke to a brother or sister, are we rooting our approach in scripture? By this, I don't mean Bible-bashing, but rather allowing God's word to guide and direct our goals, motivations, preparations and words. After all, we read in 2 Timothy that:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness... ¹⁹

One thing that's important to remember is that rebuke, if it is to be given lovingly, should be more of an exception rather than a rule. I know some believers who take the call to rebuke others too far, and they're always talking about how they like to "call people out." That misses the biblical spirit of loving rebuke, which is meant to be used sparingly. In an article he wrote on the subject, Christian author Marshall Segal puts it this way:

In the life of any local church, rebuke should be an occasional ripple in a mighty river of encouragement. ²⁰

But while loving rebuke is to be used sparingly, more often than not we tend to avoid it altogether. Today, however, we've seen how scripture (and especially Proverbs) makes it abundantly clear that

¹⁶ Proverbs 27:5-6 (NIV)

¹⁷ Proverbs 19:25b; 25:12 (NIV)

¹⁸ Proverbs 28:23a (NIV)

¹⁹ 2 Timothy 3:16 (NIV)

²⁰ Marshall Segal, [The Grace of Good Rebuke: How to Love with Hard Words](#). Desiring God, Feb. 3, 2021.

loving rebuke needs to be reclaimed as an essential aspect of cultivating healthy Christian relationships in a local church context. Only when it does can we become all that God calls us to become in Jesus. Therefore, as the Bible says in Ephesians:

... we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. ²¹

That brings us to our final point, which has to do with:

4. The heart of loving rebuke.

At the end of the day, there are no guarantees that when even when you do your prayer-filled, level-best to risk giving loving rebuke to someone else for the sake of their benefit, that they will accept and receive it.

As pastors, part of our calling is to “correct, rebuke and encourage— with great patience and careful instruction,” as Paul exhorts his young pastoral protégé, Timothy, to do. ²²

Often, we do this through preaching and teaching, which can be a demanding ministry to carry out. But then again, preaching and teaching are directed toward a broad audience, which in certain respects makes it less stressful than lovingly rebuking a brother or sister in the context of a one-on-one conversation. But such conversations are also part of what it means for us as pastors to faithfully shepherd Jesus’ flock.

Sometimes, our efforts to lovingly rebuke are well-received, and bear good fruit. Other times, as much as we may pray and prepare for those conversations, our efforts are not well-received. There have been a few occasions where people have dismissed or flat-out rejected our well-intended correction, perhaps leaving the church in anger, or even making us a villain in their story. I’ve personally experienced this, and it’s painful.

Of course, giving loving rebuke is not just the responsibility of pastors. There will be times when God will call upon you to give rebuke, and it won’t be easy. Neither is it easy when you are on the receiving end of rebuke. Whether it’s giving or receiving, where do we find the strength of heart to do this hard, hard thing?

We find the strength of heart we need in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because on his cross, Jesus received the rebuke that you and I deserved, but could never bear ourselves. He took it upon himself so that we could be forgiven, redeemed and restored in him. That’s how much he loves you and me.

And unlike any other person, Jesus knows my worst moments, my darkest thoughts, and my most besetting, rebuke-worthy sins. Still, his love for me never wavers. Tim Keller always has the best quotes along these lines, and he puts it this way:

Only Jesus knows us to the bottom, but loves us to the sky.

²¹ Ephesians 4:15 (NIV)

²² 2 Timothy 2:42

Keller goes on to say:

The gospel is that I am so sinful and flawed that Jesus had to die for me, yet so loved and valued that Jesus was glad to die for me. This leads to deep humility and deep confidence at the same time. I can't feel superior to anyone, and yet I have nothing to prove to anyone.

Therefore, any rebuke or correction I'm called to receive, I can welcome it with humility and teachability, without being devastated. Indeed, I can receive it as an expression of the very love God, who sees my heart to the bottom, and yet loves me to the sky. Along these very lines, Proverbs 3 says:

For the Lord corrects those he loves,
just as a father corrects a child in whom he delights.²³

The New Testament goes on to say in Hebrews chapter 12:

As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as his own children. Who ever heard of a child who is never disciplined by its father? If God doesn't discipline you as he does all of his children, it means that you are illegitimate and are not really his children at all. Since we respected our earthly fathers who disciplined us, shouldn't we submit even more to the discipline of the Father of our spirits, and live forever?²⁴

Because of God's unshakable love for me in Jesus, my heart not only finds the strength to receive loving rebuke from others, but also the courage to risk giving loving rebuke to others when God calls me to do so. As the Bible says in 1 John:

We love each other because he loved us first.²⁵

Every opportunity God gives me to lovingly rebuke someone is an opportunity to grow in Christlike love. Even if my efforts are dismissed or rejected, my heart needn't be crushed, because it becomes an opportunity to go deeper in intimacy with Jesus by learning to share in his sufferings.²⁶

The love of God in Christ, therefore, is the heart of loving rebuke, and it's what makes such a hard thing possible, and indeed, a channel of life for all who welcome it.

Shall we close in prayer?

²³ Proverbs 3:12 (NIV)

²⁴ Hebrews 12:7-9 (NIV)

²⁵ 1 John 4:19 (NLT)

²⁶ Romans 8:17