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The Gentle Art of Correction

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2 Timothy 2:23-26

1

I have read that when people are asked to rank their greatest fears, the fear of death ranks second after the fear of speaking in public! I don't know where the fear of confronting someone who is in sin would rank, but I suspect that it would be somewhere near the top of the list.

Many pastors are afraid to deal with sinning church members. I heard of a pastor who was a gifted Bible expositor. But he refused to confront a woman who often sang solos in that church, even though she was divorcing her husband for unbiblical reasons. He said that he didn't want to touch that one for fear of stirring up a hornet's nest!

I know of husbands whose wives are in obvious sin, but they will not offer loving, biblical correction for fear of incurring the wife's anger or retaliation. I know of Christian wives who never say anything to their professing Christian husbands who are in serious sin. The wives say that they are being submissive to their husbands, but I think that they are not acting in love towards their husbands. I know of Christian parents who refuse to correct rebellious children. They allow them to be unsociable, rude, and impudent in speech and attitude, with no correction. The parents sometimes may lose their tempers and yell at the rebellious child, but they do not correct them biblically.

Whether we like it or not (and we probably should *not* like it!), we all need to learn how to give biblical correction to those who are in sin or in serious doctrinal error. Without correction, churches and families tend to run into the ditch. In our text, Paul shows Timothy how to carry out the gentle art of correction. It applies especially to church leaders, but it also applies to every Christian, because we all have relationships that require at times, if we truly love others, for us to offer

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biblical correction. So although it is never a pleasant task, it is a part of biblical love.

There are several reasons that we shy away from correcting others. I've already mentioned *the fear factor*: we're chicken! One key to overcoming the fear of correcting those in sin or error is to recognize what verse 24 affirms, that if you know Christ, you are the Lord's bond-servant. As such, He will hold you accountable for being faithful to Him. You need to fear God more than you fear people and recognize that obedience to His command to love others requires correcting them if you see them heading for the cliff.

2

Another factor that keeps us from correcting others is *a misunderstanding of Matthew 7:1*, "Do not judge so that you will not be judged." This is one of the most misunderstood verses in the Bible. If you keep reading, in verse 6 Jesus talks about not giving what is holy to dogs and not casting your pearls before swine. Obviously, you must make some pretty harsh judgments to label someone a dog or a swine! You cannot minister to people if you do not make some judgments about their spiritual condition. Jesus meant that we should not condemn others for minor things in their lives while we ignore major sins in our own lives. First take the log out of your eye and then you can help your brother with the speck in his eye.

That leads to another reason that we do not correct others: *We are aware of sin in our own lives*. We are afraid that if we try to correct someone else, he (or she) will point the finger back at us, and we know that we're guilty as charged. So we do not bring up the other person's sin in hopes that he will not bring up our sin! But, Scripture commands us to deal with any known sin in our lives. That's why Paul's instruction here on the ministry of correction follows his exhortation on being a cleansed vessel. We do not have to be perfect to practice this ministry (or it would never get done), but we do have to judge our own sins.

Another reason we do not correct others is *laziness and procrastination*. It is *always* more of a hassle to correct than to let it go. *Always!* It takes effort to arrange a time to get together. It is stressful to talk about such matters. You risk a backlash from the other person. But, we are commanded to pursue love (2:22), and that always requires effort and risk.

Another reason we do not correct those in sin is that we have inadvertently *bought into the tolerant, relative morality of our culture*. We mistakenly think that love means accepting the person, sin and all, with no moral judgments about his behavior. But, God's Word gives us absolute standards for right and wrong behavior. If we see

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someone violating biblical standards, he is heading for the cliff. The consequence of sowing to the flesh is corruption, which isn't pretty (Gal. 6:8)! Love requires attempting to correct.

Another reason we shy away from offering correction is that *we do not know whether or not we should do it*. Some problems get resolved as we pray without saying anything. And, not all matters warrant correction. We're all imperfect and in process. God Himself is patient with us, not confronting us all at once for every area where we fall short. So, we wonder whether a particular matter calls for correction, or whether we should just bear with the person. That's one reason that I have called this the gentle *art* of correction. It requires waiting on the Lord and applying biblical wisdom to know when it's right to correct or when to remain silent.

But, even with all of these reasons why we draw back from this ministry, our text is clear:

As the Lord's servants, in love we must wisely correct those in sin and serious doctrinal error.

As I said, it's crucial that you see yourself as *the Lord's bond-servant* if you want to be obedient in this ministry. Someday you will answer to Him for whether or not you loved the people that He brought into your life. You cannot truly love someone and let him head toward a spiritual cliff without warning him. Paul shows that we should not be argumentative or quarrelsome, but he also says that we should correct those who are in opposition to the Lord. He gives us four guidelines:

1. Correction must be done wisely.

Some issues are not worth dealing with. Paul writes (2:23), "But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels." He is talking about those who were getting into fruitless doctrinal controversies in the church. Perhaps the best commentary on our text is 1 Timothy 1:3-7:

"As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus so that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines, nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering the administration of God which is by faith. But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good

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conscience and a sincere faith. For some men, straying from these things, have turned aside to fruitless discussion, wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions.”

Some doctrinal controversies are clearly important and worth defending vigorously. Paul went to Jerusalem to argue strongly against the Judaizers, who said that circumcision is necessary for salvation (Acts 15). Paul contended against Peter, whose behavior compromised the gospel on this matter (Gal. 2:11-14). Jude 3 appeals to us to contend earnestly for the faith. So Paul does not mean (in our text) that all doctrinal controversy is wrong.

Rather, he is talking about pointless issues that have no bearing on salvation or godly living. “Speculations” infers that these were matters on which the Bible is silent. I might add that while we should not get into these kinds of foolish and ignorant debates, we may need to confront the argumentative spirit of those promoting them. Some people like to argue because it feeds their pride to prove their point and to put down others. But Paul’s point is that it is futile to argue over speculative matters where the Bible either is silent or unclear.

Here are some questions to ask to help determine if an issue is a foolish and ignorant speculation to be avoided or a matter requiring biblical correction:

**Is this person involved in clear disobedience to God’s Word?* Maybe he is doing something that I don’t like, but there is no command in the Bible against it. Also, some things fall into a gray zone: they may be inadvisable, but they are not clear sin. Use discernment!

**Is a major doctrinal issue at stake?* Some doctrines are essential to the Christian faith. If you deny them, you have left the faith. Other issues may be very important for one’s view of God or man or how to live the Christian life, although they are not essential for salvation. Again, you must know Scripture and exercise discernment in light of how serious the matter is.

**What is your goal in this issue?* Do you just want to argue and prove that you’re right, or are you concerned about godliness and love? Quarreling or winning an argument does not lead anyone to Christ nor does it build up your brother in true godliness. If you must correct, your aim should be to help your brother grow in the Lord. Correction must be done wisely.

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2. Correction must be done in love.

Paul gives one negative and three positive terms. Together, these qualifications add up to biblical love.

A. Correction must not be quarrelsome.

You can't effectively correct if you are antagonistic. The most effective correction takes place when the other person knows that you love and care for him. If you go to "set him straight" or "prove that he's wrong," but do not show genuine concern for him, he will probably not adopt the viewpoint that you're arguing for, even if it is biblical.

Also, you must determine before you go to the other person that you will not get into an argument, because often the one in sin will counter by attacking you or your motives. If you allow yourself to be drawn into that kind of quarrel, you cannot be effective in the ministry of correction. You can be firm and unwavering without raising your voice or losing your temper. This applies also to husbands and wives. You can talk with your mate about a problem that concerns his or her behavior without yelling, arguing, name-calling, or attacking. In fact, these things are sin because they do not stem from biblical love.

B. Correction must be kind to all.

The Greek word means "mild" or "gentle." Paul uses it (1 Thess. 2:7) to refer to his own behavior, comparing himself to a nursing mother tenderly caring for her own child. We often think that to be effective, correction must be stern. But Paul says that we must be kind. Husbands, do you correct your wives with the tenderness of a nursing mother? Parents, do you correct your children with the same kindness you show to a nursing infant?

C. Correction must be patient when wronged.

Often when you try to correct others, they will respond by attacking you. They will falsely accuse you of wrong motives or they will bring up shortcomings in your behavior to try to divert matters away from their own sins. If you are impatient when wronged, you lose the ability to correct effectively.

D. Correction must be done with gentleness.

This word is often translated "meekness," but that conveys weakness, which is wrong. The word is used of Moses (Num. 12:3), Jesus (Matt. 11:29; 21:5), and Paul

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(2 Cor. 10:1), none of whom were weak, timid men! It is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23), and is also used in Galatians 6:1, which talks about the need to restore with gentleness those who are caught in sin. The word was used in secular Greek to refer to a horse that had been broken. It was strong and powerful, but in complete submission to its master. So the biblical word may include behavior or speech that is very strong at times. But the gentle person is sensitive and completely submissive to the Master's will. He is not acting out of self-will. He is truly "the Lord's bond-servant."

Thus, correction must be done wisely and in love.

3. Correction must be based on God's Word.

Paul says that the Lord's bond-servant must be "able to teach." The word "correcting" (2:25) is the word for "child training." It refers to giving instruction, correction, or discipline to a child. The standard for all such teaching is God's Word of truth. In other words, we should never attempt to correct by saying, "I think," or, "in my opinion, you're wrong." My opinion carries no weight. *God's* opinion what matters!

You must be careful here, because it's easy to mix up your opinions or your way of doing things with God's clear commandments. They may not be one and the same. We sometimes inherit certain views from our upbringing or from cultural notions about right and wrong.

For example, I've heard people say to children who are rambunctious in a church building, "You shouldn't behave that way in God's house!" But, church buildings are *not* God's house! God's *people* are His house, but the building is just a convenient place where the church gathers. It may be that the children need to behave in a more subdued manner in a group setting, but God's house has nothing to do with it. To view this building as a sacred place is to confuse a cultural idea with a biblical truth.

The same thing applies to what is appropriate attire at a church service. The Bible commands us to dress modestly, but it never says that we must wear a suit or dressy clothes when we gather with the church. Some argue that if you were going to meet the President, you would dress up, so you should do the same when you come to meet with the Lord. If that is so, then you'd better put on your suit before you have your morning quiet time! I actually heard a lecture in seminary where the professor used Titus 2:10, which urges slaves to "adorn the doctrine of God"

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in every respect, to argue that as pastors, we should wear a suit even when we went to the local hardware store! He was misusing Scripture to try to support a cultural value! Biblical correction must stem from biblical standards of truth and morality.

When you offer correction, emphasize that obedience to God's Word is the only path to blessing. I often ask, "You want God's blessing in your life, don't you? You can't ask God to bless your life when you are living in violation of His Word." Your correction must offer constructive help that shows the other person practically how to live in a manner that is pleasing to the Lord. As the one offering correction, you are subject to the same biblical standards. So you should be able to point to your life as an example and show the one in sin how to apply the Bible in daily life.

Thus correction must be done wisely and in love. It must be based on and in accordance with God's Word of truth.

4. Correction must be done in the awareness of spiritual warfare.

Paul says that those in error are "in opposition," that is, in opposition to God and His truth. He adds (2:25-26), "if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will."

We often see things only from the natural plane, but God's Word teaches that there is a constant spiritual battle raging on the spiritual plane. We are struggling against "the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). At bare minimum, this means that it would be utter foolishness to try to talk to men about God before we first have talked to God about men. Prayer must permeate this whole process of biblical correction.

There are several interpretive matters to consider in these verses. First, is Paul referring to believers or to unbelievers who need this correction? The fact that they need to come "to the knowledge of the truth" would point to unbelievers, since Paul uses that phrase consistently of unbelievers in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim. 2:4; 4:3; 2 Tim. 3:7; see also, Titus 1:1). On the other hand, in 1 Timothy 3:7, Paul says that an elder may fall into the snare of the devil, the same term that he uses here. Also, the verb "held captive" means to capture alive. It's as if Satan captures believers as POW's to use them for his purposes. So, it may refer both to believers and to professing believers. The test of the genuineness of their faith is whether or

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not they respond positively to correction. If someone professes to know Christ, but persists in heretical teaching or godless behavior, his claim may be suspect.

Another issue is the correct translation at the end of verse 26. The Greek pronouns are ambiguous. Some say that it is the servant of the Lord who takes captive the erring one, so that he may do God's will. Others say that the devil has captured him, but they escape so that they can again do God's will (NASB, margin). But most scholars understand it to mean that the devil has captured them to do his (the devil's) will. Probably either the second or third view is correct. The person in serious doctrinal error or disobedience to God's Word has fallen into Satan's snare and is being held captive by him. Satan's evil will is opposed to God's holy will. Since we are fighting against this powerful evil enemy, we must put on the whole armor of God, which includes prayer (Eph. 6:10-20).

Note also that while we should exhort those in sin to repent, at the same time, God must grant repentance. Scripture is clear that both are true (Acts 2:38; 5:31; 11:18). "If perhaps" shows that we cannot be sure in advance whether God will grant repentance or not. If He grants repentance, He will be glorified by the person's turning from sin to Christ. If He withholds repentance, He will be glorified by His justice in condemning the person at the judgment because he refused to repent. You've got to hold both of these truths in tension.

How do we know if the person truly repents? Paul says that he will come to "the knowledge of the truth." This means more than mental assent. It points to experiential knowledge, evidenced by a change of thinking and behavior. His life will conform to God's Word, both in doctrine and practice.

Also, he will "come to [his] senses." The Greek word means to return to soberness after being in a drunken stupor. Satan drugs his captives so that they do not think clearly. They are spiritually dull. When God grants repentance, they begin to think clearly. They often will say, "I was so deceived!"

Finally, he will "escape from the snare of the devil." Paul uses this phrase of elders that lack a good reputation with outsiders, thus falling "into reproach and the snare of the devil" (1 Tim. 3:7; see, also, 1 Tim. 6:9 on the snare of the love of money). A snare traps an animal. Sin and false teaching trap people and enslave them. When God grants repentance, they are freed from sin and are able to continue in obedience to His Word, which is the only true freedom (see John 8:31-36).

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Conclusion

Probably every one of us who is walking with Christ would not be where we're at today if other brothers and sisters had not corrected us in love. We all need this ministry from time to time, because we all are prone to get off the path.

If you are a cleansed vessel, fleeing from sin and pursuing godliness (2:20-22), then you are called to practice this gentle art of correction towards those who are flirting with or already have drifted into serious doctrinal error or sin. I want to give you some gentle, but firm correction by saying, "Do it!" Gently correct those you know that are in sin or error. Do it wisely. Do it in love. Do it in accordance with God's Word. Do it prayerfully, being aware of spiritual warfare. But do it! Do it because you love God more than anything and you love your brother or sister as you love yourself.

9

Application Questions

1. Which aspect of giving biblical correction is the most difficult for you? Why?
2. Where is the proper balance between being kind toward those in error or sin, and yet being forceful enough to make your point felt?
3. How do you fit the railing rebukes that Jesus and Paul gave (Matt. 16:23; 17:17; 23:1-36; Acts 13:9-11) with kindness and gentleness? Should we ever imitate these rebukes?
4. How can you know when to correct someone and when to let his (or her) fault go? What are some biblical guidelines?

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