

Refusing Correction Is Foolish

Proverbs 15:32; Galatians 6:1

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Most people would profess a desire to acquire knowledge and understanding. And God has given to those who truly desire knowledge a divinely appointed means of obtaining it: Don't refuse or ignore the correction you receive from others. For the Lord would make you strong by first showing to you your weakness. He would make you courageous by first showing to you your fears. He would make you holy by first showing to you your sin. He would make you leaders by first making you servants. He would make you wise by first showing to you your foolishness. He would fill you with knowledge by first showing to you your ignorance.

For one of the greatest hindrances to growing in knowledge and wisdom is our own stubborn pride. Pride thinks it already knows it all. Pride does not want to be a student, but a teacher at all times. Pride is unteachable. But God our Father has sovereignly determined in His most holy plan that the way to obtain knowledge, understanding, and wisdom is to crucify our pride, acknowledge we don't know everything, and thankfully receive the correction of others. Let us consider then the divine way to grow in knowledge from our text in Proverbs 15:32 this Lord's Day where we see the following two main points: (1) The Consequences of Refusing Correction; (2) The Reward of Hearing Reproof.

I. The Consequences of Refusing Correction ("He that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul").

A. Here first we see the folly of those who will not receive correction.

1. Note what is first said to be refused or ignored: Instruction (literally, the Hebrew word means correction or discipline). Here is one who hates to be told that he/she has said or done something wrong or is deficient in knowledge in some way.

a. When he is corrected, the walls go up. Perhaps he will become defensive and seek to justify his error trying to prove how much he really does know. Perhaps she will become silent and crawl into a shell and isolate herself from the bully. Perhaps he will fight back in anger in a more aggressive fashion and try to show how little the corrector knows. Perhaps she will murmur and rail behind his back after the one who has corrected her is gone. Perhaps he will say he appreciates the correction, but continue to ignore it, going along in his own stubborn and willful way.

b. There may be many different responses on the part of those who refuse or ignore correction, but the outcome is the same: they will not take it to heart and seek by God's grace to learn from the correction given to them. Their stubborn pride will not allow them to admit they have a fault, a sin, an error, a misunderstanding, or ignorance. So instead of growing in knowledge, wisdom, and understanding, they rather cherish their fantasy world view of their gifts and abilities and ignore the correction.

c. Those who foolishly despise correction will inevitably give reasons why they did not receive the correction given to them.

(1) "He didn't approach me in love and meekness." He may not have delivered the rebuke in as gracious of a manner as he should, but if what he said was the truth, we should be all ears because we want to become wise. It is true that when we correct or rebuke one another, we should speak the truth in love. Correct others as you would have others correct you—that's the law of love as we see in Galatians 6:1. But dear ones, let us never refuse to hear and obey the truth simply because it wasn't served to us in the most pleasing manner. If you were literally starving, you would not care how the food was served to you. You would simply be thankful to receive nourishment. Likewise, if you hunger and thirst to be filled with knowledge and wisdom, you will not despise correction even if it is not served in humility and love. We must even turn the harsh criticism of others into a school lesson where we ask ourselves: Is there any merit at

all in the harsh criticism I just received? Can I use anything that was said to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ? Since the Lord has ordained from eternity all correction or criticism that comes into your life, He certainly intends that you benefit and profit from it in some way. Do you earnestly ask the Lord how you can improve the criticism that has been offered to you? If you do not see that the correction is justified at all (perhaps it is based upon misinformation or a misunderstanding), you must humbly say so. But never easily dismiss the correction or even criticism of others simply because you do not like the way that they presented it. You may even indicate (if there is merit in the criticism in any way) that you see their point, but then perhaps you can also humbly instruct that brother or sister in how they might improve in meekly correcting others in the future.

(2) “He didn’t correct me privately.” Dear ones, not all rebuke or correction need be done privately, if, in fact, the sin or error meets the following three criteria. 1. If the behavior or words were clearly a violation of God’s Law. 2. If it was committed publicly in the hearing or view of others. 3. If it is likely to cause offence to others and create division within the body of Christ. When, for example, a minister is publicly rebuked for heretical doctrines he promotes in a public lecture or sermon (and it is clear that he embraces these heresies), it is not necessary to begin at the private stage. As when Paul publicly rebuked Peter (in Galatians 2) for his scandalous behavior (an error in practice not necessarily an error in doctrine) because Peter refused to eat with the Gentiles when certain Jews from Jerusalem frowned upon it. So likewise ministers or anyone else may be publicly rebuked for public, scandalous sin or error. Furthermore, note how the Apostle Paul skips over the first steps in Matthew 18 (of private admonition and bringing two or three witnesses) and jumps to excommunication in 1 Corinthians 5 because of the public scandal of a member who had married his step-mother.

(3) “He/She is subordinate to me and should not have corrected me.” Where in the Scripture does it teach that subordinates may not correct their superiors? Solomon’s words here are not limited to superiors correcting subordinates or equals correcting equals, but rather simply states without qualification, “He that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul.”

[1] In fact, I would submit that a superior that cannot receive correction from an inferior should not be in a place of leadership for he acts as though his authority is absolute (rather than delegated). When a superior receives the legitimate correction of a subordinate, it does not mar or distort authority, but rather reveals the true quality of human authority—that it is not absolute, but derived from God; and therefore authority must humble itself before even the smallest child when that child brings in hand the Word of God.

[2] It will doubtless be the case that parents, supervisors, lawful ministers and elders, and lawful magistrates will administer correction more often than they receive correction. However, that is not to say that there will never be those times when superiors need to be corrected (and even publicly if the sin is committed publicly).

[3] Even though Peter states (in 1 Peter 3:6) that Sarah submitted to Abraham and called him her lord (or her head), nevertheless, Sarah rebuked Abraham (with God’s approval) when he wanted to keep Hagar and Ishmael in the family and said to him, “Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman will not be heir with my son, even with Isaac” (Genesis 21:10).

[4] The soldiers of Saul rebuked him in 1 Samuel 14:45.

[5] Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego rebuked the pride of King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 3:15ff.

[6] The prophets continually rebuke priests and kings alike (remember Nathan rebuking David?). However, when, for example, a child believes it is necessary to correct a parent (or a wife to correct a husband, or a member to correct an elder or minister) for some conspicuous sin or error, let them come with Scripture in hand and humbly and respectfully speak the truth in love (not looking for every possible opportunity to correct, but doing so only when necessary).

[7] Neither superiors, nor subordinates, nor equals should anxiously await every possible opportunity to wield the sword of correction, lest the sword grow dull and lose its effect. When correction is used sparingly, meekly, and necessarily, it will more likely be an effective sword in cutting to the very heart of a person.

2. Note, secondly, what is the end of one who refuses the correction of others: He despises himself (Proverbs 8:36; Proverbs 15:10).

a. By his refusal to hear or to admit that he is wrong or deficient in some way, he shows he actually despises himself. Keil and Delitzsch give to us (in their commentary on this verse) the true meaning of what it means to despise oneself when they say, "The despising of the soul is then the neglecting, endangering, exposing of the life; in a word, it is suicide." Dear ones, do you understand? To ignore legitimate correction in your life is to destroy yourself. For the foolish man/woman/child that refuses to be corrected or does not take correction seriously refuses the truth being offered to him and consigns himself to a weak, ignorant state of soul.

b. What happens to the person who hardens his heart to the Holy Spirit's conviction of sin and use of the Law of God in his life? Perhaps no one else even knows that he struggles with this sin, but God knows and shows to him the wickedness of this secret sin. If he ignores the correction of the Holy Spirit, if he refuses to hear the rebuke of God's Law, he will be given over to more serious sins and plunge his soul into danger and even destruction (apart from the grace of God). In such a case, he is like a man who refuses to hear that he has cancer and thus will not receive the help he needs to overcome it. By his refusal, he, in effect, commits suicide.

c. What happens to the person who hardens his heart to the legitimate discipline of the church? Matthew 18 gives to us the ordinary process by which correction is to be administered within the church for the health and well-being of its members (not for their destruction, but for their edification). Correction ordinarily begins privately and if it is not heeded privately after earnest, humble, and loving attempts, correction then moves to the next stage where two or three witnesses are brought in order to confirm every word that is said. If the correction at this level is refused, then the matter for correction is brought to the courts of the church where the one administering the correction and the witnesses are heard before ministers and elders just as in a civil trial. The case is tried. If the court of Jesus Christ legitimately rules that correction has been stubbornly refused, that obstinate refusal will lead either to a lesser excommunication (suspension from the Lord's Supper), or to a greater excommunication (removal from the Visible Church). Although these censures are not necessarily permanent nor do they actually damn a person to hell (as falsely taught by the Romish Church), these censures are the supreme corrections lovingly administered by the church to those who refuse correction.

B. Dear ones, ask yourself, Why do I hate to be corrected by others? Is it not our pride that is offended? Is it not our pride that must be mortified? When we thankfully submit to legitimate correction, and understand the legitimate correction of others to be the loving correction and discipline of our Heavenly Father (as taught in Hebrews 12), we will take steps toward destroying pride in our lives and will be prepared by the Holy Spirit to receive knowledge, understanding, and wisdom from the Lord.

II. The Reward of Hearing Reproof ("But he that heareth reproof getteth understanding").

A. Here is the glorious flipside of good news to the previous warning. Dear ones, this hearing of reproof is not a mere work of the flesh in the heart of man. For no man naturally wants to hear reproof from God or others. Those who earnestly and thankfully receive the faithful correction of God and others can take no credit themselves, for this is the evidence of the work of God's grace in the soul of a sinner who apart from God's free grace will continue on a path of self-destruction in not heeding the correction of God and others. For if the Lord did not sovereignly and effectually call the sinner to Himself and give to him a humble heart to

receive God's holy and righteous reproof of sin and error, the sinner would continue in his refusal to heed the conviction of sin. But when God the Father covenanted with God the Son from all eternity to redeem and save those whom He had elected, the Son of God came to earth and bore even the sin of stubborn and willful pride for His elect. Your Savior suffered the infinite wrath of a holy God against our obstinate pride so that this pride which condemns all men to hell may be graciously forgiven by God as you come to Christ trusting in Him alone for your righteousness, your forgiveness, your eternal life, and your power to overcome pride in your life. Dear ones, boast not in yourself that you are enabled to receive correction from God or others. Rather fall down on your face before your merciful God and with a thankful heart boast in the grace of Christ and in the cross of Christ that has made you willing to receive correction.

B. God sets before you, dear ones, the way of life and the way of death (Jeremiah 21:8). He urges you to choose life (Deuteronomy 30:19). And the Lord mercifully instructs you that the way of life is to earnestly and thankfully receive correction (Proverbs 6:23); whereas the way of death is stubbornly and foolishly to refuse correction (Proverbs 15:10). The Lord today calls out to you by His Word and Spirit that you be not like the foolish man in Proverbs 5:12. But rather that you be like the wise man in Proverbs 8:36. Christ is made unto you wisdom (according to 1 Corinthians 1:30). You cannot be wise, and you cannot be truly knowledgeable without Christ. Yes, it hurts to be corrected, but it is only our pride that hurts. Let us, therefore, grow in our love of truth, knowledge, and wisdom to such an extent that we thankfully receive all legitimate correction that comes our way. I urge you in the name of Christ, choose life not death.

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