

# Westlake Church Lausanne (30.05.10)

*Correct me if I'm wrong! From the book of Proverbs  
by Tom Rizzo*

## Introduction

### ***a. General***

I recently went to the Amazon.com website and searched for books with the words "How to" in the title. It told me that there were more 300'000 books that matched my inquiry. While I didn't take the time to look at all of them, here are a few of the titles that I came across:

- How to Win Friends and Influence People
- How to Be Happy Even When Life Has Other Plans for You
- How to Think Like Leonardo Da Vinci : Seven Steps to Genius Every Day
- How to Turn Off Your Body's Fat-Making Machine
- How to Make People Like You in 90 Seconds or Less
- How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life
- I Could Do Anything If I Only Knew What It Was : How to Discover What You Really Want and How to Get It

Clearly there seems to be a market for people who want to improve themselves.

There can be a tendency among Christians to use the Bible as a Christian "How to" book, sometimes even opening it somewhat randomly to seek advice.

You may have heard the story, which almost certainly isn't true, of the man who seeking guidance from Scripture, randomly opened his New Testament and read from **Matt. 27:5**:

*"So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself."*

Perplexed about what this was telling him, he opened the Bible once again and read from

***Luke 10:37. . . "Go and do likewise."***

Becoming a bit more concerned, he opened once again and read in

***John 13:27 . . . "What you are about to do, do quickly," Jesus told him,***

We have to be careful not to treat the Bible as a simple “How to” book that we randomly open for advice or guidance. We must study it in its context, look at the larger storyline and try to understand where we fit into that storyline.

If, however, there was one book of the Bible that one could treat this way, it would be the book of PROVERBS.

If we wanted to market this book of the Bible on Amazon.com, we might entitle it – **HOW TO BE WISE**. It is a collection of sayings that teach us wisdom for everyday life.

For the last few weeks we have embarked on a study of the book of Proverbs. Because of the nature of this particular book, we are doing it topically.

### ***b. Reminder of a bit of background***

Just to remind you of a bit of background, the Book of Proverbs was written, for the most part, by Solomon, the Son of David who succeeded him as King of the nation of Israel. (I say for the most part because Solomon collected wise sayings other than his own, and some of these are included in chapters 30 and 31.)

After succeeding David on the throne, Solomon offered 1000 burnt offerings on the altar to God. In response, God told him: “Ask for whatever you want me to give to you”

Rather than asking for long life or wealth or power, he asked God for a discerning heart to govern the people of Israel and to distinguish between right and wrong.

We read in 1 Kings 4:29

*1Kgs. 4:29 God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore . . . 34 Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.*

### ***c. What is wisdom***

It is important to have a proper understanding of what Biblical wisdom is. It is not abstract and theoretical. It is the application of truth and understanding to make right decisions in life.

Proverbs 1: 3 captures this sense of wisdom quite well:

*Prov. 1:3 to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity;*

**d. Introduction of today's subject: CORRECTION**

Even though we are not studying this book sequentially, today I would like to pick up where Martin left off last week. He preached on the first half of Proverbs 1:7

*Prov. 1:7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline (instruction).*

The starting point for us this morning will be the second half of this verse.

I have shown the NIV translation of this verse. The ESV translates the word discipline here as instruction, although other places it uses discipline.

In English the word discipline can be interpreted in several ways:

- **order and control (like a Swiss German household)**
- **training to ensure proper behavior**
- **punishment**

The Hebrew word that is used here in Proverbs is somewhere between these: it very much carries the idea of correction or rebuke.

We can let Proverbs itself help us interpret the word. Remember that the book of Proverbs is poetry, and in Hebrew poetry you often get two part statements in which the second part reinforces or interprets the first part, or it contrasts it. Let look at a few of these:

*Prov. 3:11 My son, do not despise the LORD's **discipline** and do not resent his **rebuke**,*

*Prov. 5:12 You will say, "How I hated **discipline**! How my heart spurned **correction**!"*

*Prov. 15:5 A fool spurns his father's **discipline**, but whoever heeds **correction** shows prudence.*

*Prov. 10:17 He who heeds **discipline** shows the way to life, but whoever ignores **correction** leads others astray.*

Discipline is connected here to rebuke or correction. It is a major theme in the book of Proverbs.

One of the major purposes of the book is that one might learn how to receive correction, and in doing so become wise.

**Basic idea – staying on the right path and learning to make the right decisions in life requires correction.**

**This should not be surprising. If one wants to grow, to become something that one isn't, one needs to be corrected and pointed in the right direction.**

It is like a ship that needs to remain on course. It often needs correction. Proverbs is saying here that an essential part of becoming wise is learning to receive correction.

I think we would all agree that this is true for our kids. As they grow they must learn to make right choices in life, and one of the major ways we teach them is to correct them when they make wrong choices.

Why do we often believe that once we reach adulthood, we have arrived and no longer have need for correction? Do we believe that we always make the right choices in life?

There is a common expression that one sometimes hears in conversation,

### **Correct me if I'm wrong**

It is often said in an insincere way, similar to "If I am not mistaken", just to cover oneself.

Proverbs is telling us that this attitude is key for a person who wants to develop Godly wisdom.

This morning I would like to look at this subject from two different points of view:

**(1) Receiving correction or rebuke**

**(2) Giving correction or rebuke**

**(3) A Biblical example**

**(4) Applications**

# 1. Receiving correction

## a. Attitudes towards correction or rebuke

Proverbs has a lot to say about attitudes towards receiving correction:

*Prov. 3:11 My son, do not **despise** the LORD's discipline and do not **resent** his rebuke,*

*Prov. 12:1 Whoever **loves** discipline loves knowledge, but he who **hates** correction is stupid.*

*Prov. 13:18 He who **ignores** discipline comes to poverty and shame, but whoever **heeds** correction is honored.*

*Prov. 15:5 A fool **spurns** his father's discipline, but whoever **heeds** correction shows prudence.*

What are the positive attitudes – those that are considered wise?

**Love, heeds**

While many of us might be willing to say that we listen to correction and even heed it, how many would go as far as to say that we love it?

What are some of the negative attitudes – those considered stupid or foolish?

**despise, resent, hate, ignore, spurn**

Let's try to bring this a bit closer to home. How do you regard correction?

- If your boss comes to you and chews you out because he thinks that your presentation to a customer was unclear. Or that your annual report was sloppy.

How do you respond to it?

Do you ignore it?

Do you hate it or resent it?

- Or your husband comes to you and says that he thinks that you handled a situation badly with the children.

- Or your wife thinks that it is unwise for you to be spending so much time with a female coworker.
- Or if a friend suggests to you that the way you have been doing your income taxes is not entirely honest.
- Or one of your buddies tells you that you are being too selfish on the basketball court.

If we are honest with ourselves, while we might **listen** to the rebuke of others, none of us really **like** to be corrected.

Few of us could probably go as far as to say that we **love** correction or discipline.

None of us really likes it.

Why do we dislike correction? Why do we have a tendency to want to ignore it or write it off.

### ***b. Reasons for wanting to ignore correction***

#### **(i) Because of the messenger.**

There might be a tendency to ignore it because of the messenger.

“Who is he to say something like that to me? Look at his own life. He no one to talk. Once he gets his act together then he can come to me.”

It is perhaps a way that we are able to rationalize our behavior.

#### **(ii) Because of the way it is delivered**

The way the correction is delivered can affect how we receive it. When your boss blows up at you, it may make you less receptive to listening to what he/she says than if it was delivered a bit more sensitively.

#### **(iii) Because we compare ourselves to others**

There may be a tendency to compare ourselves to others around us and in doing so we don't seem so bad.

You might say to yourself “My wife complains, but she should feel lucky that she is not married to Joe next door – he is never around; never spends any time with the kids.

Or about your boss: "He thinks that I don't work hard enough, but I work much harder than so-and-so"

#### **(iv) A deeper reason**

I think that there is often a deeper reason, and let me illustrate it with a story.

#### **Story about a PhD student.**

When I was a young professor in the US, I had a very bright PhD student – I will call him Larry. He was one of the brightest in his year.

Larry was very quick to learn, and he soon had some very interesting results from his experiments. We sat in my office to discuss them, and I began to help him think things through.

A good scientist, when he discovers something new, needs to be able to take a step back and say about his own work – how could this be wrong? How might we be mistaken to get this result. The more important and revolutionary the result the more vigorously and rigorously one must apply this rule. And so I began to explore with him where might we have made a mistake or fooled ourselves in interpreting the data?

This was a foreign concept for Larry, and he never was able to accept it. He felt that by criticizing the data – that is by considering the possibility that it might be wrong – that it was an attack on him – an affront to his self esteem. I was never able to make him understand that this is how science has to work.

Later that year, Larry was taking a class from me. In this particular class I gave a take home exam – clearly indicating to the students that they were to do it entirely on their own. When I received the exam papers and began to grade them, I noticed an unusual similarity in the answers from two of the students. One of them was from Larry and the other from a much weaker student. It was clear what had happened, since Larry was the best student in the class and had no need to cheat – he had helped the other student by letting him see his exam.

I called the two students into my office, showed them the evidence that I had and asked them to tell me how this could happen. They could not refute the evidence, and they admitted that Larry had let the weaker student copy his work.

The weaker student failed the course, and since he had problems with other courses he ended up flunking out and leaving the program.

I reduced Larry's grade for the course, but I didn't fail him and I decided not to turn him in. I took him aside and explained that this was an opportunity for him to learn – that I would forget about it and that he should never consider doing something like this again.

Despite this, he could not face me. He could not feel good about himself because of what he did, and I was the only one who knew about it. At the end of the second year he decided to transfer to another university where he wouldn't have to carry the burden of someone knowing his secret.

### **Let's now come back to our own situation.**

Why do we dislike correction or rebuke.

It is perhaps because of the way it makes us feel. If I am wrong about something and someone points it out to me, it means that I have fallen short in some way. I have failed. I cannot think as good about myself as I would like. It affects my self-esteem.

We like to feel that we are basically good. We are on the right track. We are more or less keeping God's commands. Living a good life.

When someone comes to us and says that we have screwed up; we have done something wrong; we are on the wrong track – it bursts our little bubble. It says that we have fallen short. If it is true – if we accept the possibility that the person may be right – we can't lift our head as high as we would like. We are not as good as we thought we were. And for that reason, we don't want to accept the correction.

### **In reacting this way, aren't we denying the Gospel!**

The word *Gospel* literally means "good news". Why is it good news?

If being a Christian means that I have to work as hard as I can to keep the ten commandments in order to be acceptable to God, why is this good news?

It might seem even worse. Jesus says this in the Sermon on the mount (Matt 5):

*21 "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' 22But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment;"*

*27" You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

According to this, we are all murderers and adulterers.

If our self-worth comes from how well we keep God's high standards for us, then we don't really understand the Gospel.

The apostle Paul said in the book of Ephesians

Ephesians 2:8-9

*8For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9not by works, so that no one can boast.*

The good news is that we are considered righteous before God—not because of anything that we have done—but because Jesus Christ took the penalty for our sins. This comes as a gift that we receive by grace by faith. Grace means unmerited favor – something we haven't earned.

Too many of us, even those who have been Christians for a long time, feel good about ourselves because we think that we are generally on the right track, keeping God's commandments. We slip into feeling that we merit God's favor and acceptance.

When someone comes to us and tells us that we are on the wrong track and tries to correct us, it may burst our bubble about who we believe that we are, and hence we don't like it. We may deny it or reject it. We cannot accept correction because of what it does to our self-esteem.

However, if we understand deeply the nature of grace, then our self-worth is not tied to our performance. We are accepted by God on the basis of faith in what Jesus has done for us.

Once we fully embrace this, we can be free to accept correction. We can even invite it. Our motivation is gratitude for what he has done for us in Jesus, and by accepting correction our lives will become more of what he wants for us.

**Once we come to the understanding that our righteousness and self-worth do not come from our performance, we can see that we have nothing to lose and everything to gain by listening to correction.**

Even if the correction is wrong and after listening to it we decide it was off-base, we have lost nothing by listening and considering it.

**But if the correction was right and we and we ignore it, we lose.**

**c. What are the consequences of ignoring it?**

*Prov. 10:17 He who heeds discipline shows the way to life, but whoever ignores correction leads others astray.*

*Prov. 13:18 He who ignores discipline comes to poverty and shame, but whoever heeds correction is honored.*

Ignoring correction is unwise. It may cause us to lead others astray and bring shame not only on ourselves, but perhaps also on our Lord.

**We should therefore invite correction.**

## **2. Giving correction**

This can be a difficult subject, because there might seem to be several principles that clash.

Consider Jesus' own remarks about judging

*Matt. 7:1 "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. 2 For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*

On the other hand, it is clear from Proverbs that if correction is so important, someone must be doing the correcting.

*Prov. 25:12 Like an earring of gold or an ornament of fine gold is a wise man's rebuke to a listening ear.*

*Prov. 27:5 Better is open rebuke than hidden love.*

Moreover, it is clear that Paul corrects many of those who he is writing to in the New Testament.

You may say, I am not Paul. Perhaps only the leaders of the church should do this.

But this is not the picture presented by Proverbs. This is wisdom for all people. If we care about our brothers and sisters in Christ, then we may sometimes need to correct them.

*The current popular notion that judging others is in itself a sin leads to such inappropriate maxims as 'I'm okay and you're okay.' It encourages a conspiracy of moral indifference which says, "If you never tell me that anything I'm doing is wrong, I'll never tell you that anything you're doing is wrong."*

Citation: Elisabeth Elliot Gren, Leadership, Vol. 3, no. 1.

The key, I believe is in how it is done. We must "speak the truth in love" as Paul says in the Ephesians 4. Love has to be our motivation, and the person being rebuked must feel and understand this.

It is no different from what we do with our children. If we are disciplining them out of anger or frustration, then it is not restoring. One must transmit the motivation of love along with the correction.

From the point of view of the receiver, however, no matter how the rebuke is given, it is an opportunity to grow. Even if it was given with the wrong attitude or if it was not 100% on target, we can sift through it to see if there is any truth in it. We only lose if we ignore it.

**One final point - it may cost us something to be a giver of rebuke.**

It may not be easy. We can expect some difficulties.

*Prov. 9:7 "Whoever corrects a mocker invites insult; whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse. 8 Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you.*

### 3. A Biblical Example

Let me give you a Biblical example of rebuke, since it illustrates both giving and receiving rebuke.

It is found in 2 Samuel 12

Tell the background. Didn't go to war with his men. Saw Bathsheba, who was married to one of the soldiers, on the rooftop. Slept with her and she became pregnant. He summoned Uriah home, but Uriah refused to sleep with his wife while his buddies were still on the front lines fighting. So David told the captain to put Uriah on the front line and then have the other men draw back so that he would be killed, and this is what happened. You can see how one sin simply leads to another.

*1And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. 2The rich man had very many flocks and herds, 3but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. 4Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him." 5Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, 6and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."*

*7Nathan said to David, "**You are the man!**"*

*13David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD."*

Think about the risk that Nathan took in rebuking the king – he was taken his life into his hands. David might have well taken his sword and run it right through him.

But the Holy Spirit worked in David's heart to convict him of his sin and led him to repentance.

Despite this incident, David is described by God as "a man after his own heart".

## 4. Applications

### ***a. What is your attitude towards receiving correction or rebuke***

Do you project a teachable attitude, one that would allow you to be approachable. Or would someone be terrified to come to you with a word of correction.

### ***b. Do you have people around you that are willing to correct you.***

Do you have close Christian friends that are willing to do this? Are you a part of a small group where this goes on?

### ***c. Are you willing to correct your brothers and sisters in Christ in love.***

It can be a risk to a relationship if the correction is not well received. Think of what Nathan the Prophet risked to confront David about killing Uriah.

(As for the PhD student in the story, he went on to a very good university, received a PhD, did postdoctoral work in an Ivy League school and eventually got a job as an assistant professor at a Christian college (which may mean that he became a Christian). However it seems that he did not get promoted to a permanent position. It is difficult to tell if he ever learned how to take correction

**The ability to receive correction is essential—without it, it is difficult to become wise.**

*Prov. 6:23 For these commands are a lamp, this teaching is a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way to life,*

***I would ask you, please, to correct me if I'm wrong.***