



THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Be Wiser Still

Proverbs 9:8-12 (NIV)

⁸ Do not rebuke mockers or they will hate you; rebuke the wise and they will love you. ⁹ Instruct the wise and they will be wiser still; teach the righteous and they will add to their learning. ¹⁰ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. ¹¹ For through wisdom your days will be many, and years will be added to your life. ¹² If you are wise, your wisdom will reward you; if you are a mocker, you alone will suffer.

Imagine yourself as a 3rd grade teacher. You've been teaching the kids multiplication and are handing back the corrected math tests. Little Johnny raises his hand after getting his test back. "Teacher, you're wrong." Okay, you think to yourself. Little bit of an insolent tone, but I certainly could have made a mistake while correcting. So you say, "Well, Johnny, let's take a look." He shows you the problem you marked wrong: 2x3 with his answer of 5. You corrected him by writing a 6 in red next to the problem with the 5 crossed out. You start to explain. "Oh, yes, if you have two sets of 3, how many do you have? You have 6, right?" Johnny responds, "Pfft, what do you know? I've been doing math for some time now, and I know the answer is 5. Where did you even get your teaching degree anyway?" You take a deep breath, trying not to lose your calm. You take the insult in stride because you want to correct this child for his benefit. Math, multiplication, is truly needed for much more than an answer on a test. So you say, "Johnny, I'm sorry, but 5 is the wrong answer to this question. 6 is the correct answer. Let me show you how we get there." Johnny responds with a huff, "Don't bother. I can't learn anything from you." Oh, man. Being a good teacher, you cannot say all the things you want to say right now. You have more than half a mind just to send little Johnny to the principal's office. This kid needs an attitude adjustment. He needs to accept correction and instruction for his sake. I want him to succeed. I want to help him. But he hates me; he won't listen to me.

Now, reverse the situation. You are being corrected. The teacher tells you that your answer is wrong, tells you the right one showing you how to get to the correct answer. What's your attitude? Do you give your undivided attention to the teacher, learning where your disconnect is, where you went wrong in your answer so that you can get it right from now on? Do you immediately get a bit mad because you are certain that the teacher is the one who did something wrong and that you are right? Do you reread the answer and work to convince yourself that you are right?

"Do not rebuke mockers or they will hate you; rebuke the wise and they will love you." (verse 8) To rebuke someone means to give them a sharp, blunt correction. You blatantly tell them that what they are doing or did do was wrong. You don't try to sugar coat it or make it more palatable. It's that moment with your kids that after you have been gently guiding them and reminding them of the right thing to do and they do the wrong thing one more time, you drop the kindness and say: "Stop it right now. That is wrong."

How do you respond to a rebuke? Does it make you sad, like instant tears sort of sad because you know that you did wrong? Is it with disregard, that this person has no idea what they're talking about so I can ignore what they're saying? Is it to become mad, that you are offended by the nerve of this person to have the audacity to correct you and you start thinking of ways to shame them, make them feel stupid in retaliation for how they made you feel?

I know what my first reaction is when I am rebuked, criticized bluntly and sharply, especially for things I do as a pastor. When I have someone quote the Bible to me or throw an accusation in my face of what they think I should be doing, I know my defenses are immediately raised. My first inclination is not to listen with compassion, understanding, patience, or a willingness to examine myself. I self-righteously want to defend myself. The internal monologue screams all the ways that I was not only justified in what I did, but how right I was in how I did it, that I may not have done it perfectly, but it was the right thing to do, and that this person's rebuke and correction come from a place of ignorance or lashing out at me because they don't like what I did.

I'm guessing that when you think of times when you have been rebuked – at home, at work, at school – you have had a similar reaction, especially when it's something that you gave a great deal of thought to before doing. How dare they rebuke me, judge me! We scoff at the correction. What a jerk for them to say that to me! We know what is best. We are smarter than they are. We have thought this out well. Who do they think they are? These thoughts drive us to even hate the person who corrected us.

In our self-righteousness and self-confidence, we have become the mocker, the scoffer, who hates the person who rebukes us. We have forgotten where we need to start. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." (verse 10)

The “fear of the LORD” is an interesting and maybe misunderstood phrase. One aspect of the phrase is meant to make us think of fear, of being afraid, afraid that the perfect, all powerful God will judge us for our sin, for being wrong. That’s a scary thought. It’s also a phrase that reminds us to know our place before God. As smart or as clever or as well educated or well thought out that we are, we are not smarter or cleverer or more educated or more well thought out than God is. Fear the LORD means to respect him as the all-powerful, all-knowing God that he is. To fear of the LORD is to know our place, that we are the created, not the Creator.

Thinking about little Johnny who scoffed at his teacher trying to correct his multiplication error, how many times have we treated God with that kind of an attitude? How many times have we read something in God’s Word and we go “Pfft, what does he know?” Or we read God’s Word, know that it sounds good, but then never apply it, never live it out? “I know God said love my neighbor as he loved me, but if he only knew how arrogant and selfish that person is.” “I know God says honor marriage and keep the marriage bed pure, but, you know, we have desires and needs. How can God restrict love?” “I know God says to listen to my spiritual leaders, my pastor, but I’m more spiritually mature than they are. Why should I listen to them?”

True wisdom which starts with the fear of the LORD says that we do not know more than God. To fear of the LORD is to humble ourselves, that we would listen when God says something to us through his Word. Instead of rejecting outright as if I know more than God, that I would take a step back and re-examine my life, my words, my actions, my thoughts. In fearing the LORD, there is a submission. I subject myself to his way of thinking, to his instruction. I can learn from him. He can instruct me. He can make me wiser. He can add to my learning.

This attitude, this wisdom, comes only from the Holy Spirit working through that rebuke. He changes our hearts. He gets us to rip out that self-righteous pride from our hearts, throw it on the floor, and stomp on it. He humbles us to consider that this person who rebukes me is trying to help me, to add to my learning, to make me wiser still, help me in my Christian walk of life. This person actually cares enough about me to say something when so many other people would just let me continue on the way I was going without correcting me.

In this way, with this attitude given by the Holy Spirit, we accept the rebuke. We bite our tongues that instantly want to mock and scoff at this person for trying to correct me. We rip out our self-righteous pride from our hearts and stomp on it on the ground. We repent. We come back to God to receive the forgiveness of our sins all over again. And we are forgiven by Christ’s life, his works, his merits, his death on the cross. Then we take the blunt correction and ask, “What can I learn from this? Am I really doing this wrong? Can I do better? Do I need to rethink my approach? Am I acting contrary to God’s will?” From this humble attitude worked in us by the Holy Spirit, we grow in our wisdom.

Once the Holy Spirit has worked this attitude in our hearts, this is the fear of the LORD that is the beginning of wisdom. Our pride has been broken down and removed. We submit ourselves to God and what he has done for us. It’s only after we have this attitude that we ourselves do what God tells us to do in these verses. We rebuke the wise. We come at it for their good, knowing that we ourselves have received that rebuke. We give that blunt correction because it will benefit them. We want people to be wiser still, to add to their learning.

We rebuke people, correct them bluntly according to God’s Word, because we want the good things God provides for them. “For through wisdom your days will be many, and years will be added to your life.” (verse 11) Rebuke will lead to wise decisions this side of heaven, wise decisions that will probably prolong your life. Rebuke that leads to the fear of the LORD will lead to something much greater. It will lead not just to many days or many years added to your life, but infinite, eternal, everlasting years as it leads you to the LORD.

The fear of the LORD will lead you to cast out the self-righteous pride and instead to humble ourselves to God, taking pride in what he has done for us. He lived out the perfection that we never could. He never sinned and so never needed correction. He is wiser than any of us could ever be. He gives that life of wisdom to us through his Word. He sends the Holy Spirit to us to change our hearts in line with his wisdom. By him, by his wisdom, we are saved; we are forgiven; we have eternal years added to our lives.

And so we push away the little Johnny in all of us, that mocker, that scoffer, who refuses correction. By the Holy Spirit working on our hearts through godly rebuke, we are humbled to the wisdom of God. He places in us the fear of the LORD which trusts God’s wisdom, his Word, over our own wisdom. Through God’s wisdom, he adds to us his righteousness, his perfection. We take pride in him, not our thoughts or our ways. Lord, continue to give us this humble heart to receive your correction, to instruct us that we will be wiser still. Amen.