



LOVE PEOPLE BUILD OTHERS

TODAY'S ERA

Increasingly, we live in an era resistant to the idea that one person should “fix” another. Instead we are to “accept” people. We let people do what they want to do.

In previous eras, fixing another person, challenging them, telling them they needed to change, was much more accepted. This doesn't mean those who received correction welcomed it; but it does mean correction was more commonly given.

Today's era, with our reluctance to correct, has many strengths. With acceptance on the rise, petty bickering declines. People are increasingly able to be honest with their views, their opinions, and maybe most importantly, their struggles and wounds. Pretense has decreased. Authenticity has increased. Increasingly, we can all come out of the closet with what's truly going on in our lives.

The increased disposition toward acceptance has its challenges as well. What do we do when someone we love is destroying himself with an addiction? Do we let culture's disposition toward acceptance keep us from lovingly encouraging qualitative change in that person's life?

Or how about when relationships clash? This doesn't just happen with people we don't like. It happens with people we genuinely and deeply love. Are we to ignore the challenges another person brings to a friendship or a marriage because we fear offending our culture's bias toward acceptance? Would that be authentic and loving, or a pretense all its own? Surely we shouldn't pretend all is well when, in fact, all is not well.

Add to these challenges the teachings of Scripture. We most certainly don't want to force our views on others—that doesn't work. But Scripture says a great deal about speaking truth and talking with others about following Christ. Consider Paul's example: *“Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others”* (2 Corinthians 5:11).

And a few lines later we read, *“We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God”* (2 Corinthians 5:20).

Paul was doing what Jesus himself told us to do. We are to *“make disciples of all nations”* (Matthew 28:19). Little could be more offensive to the current era. Who are we to tell others, especially those from another nation or culture, that they should become followers of Christ? Such thinking is in stark contrast to the mood of the day.

Which could cause one of two reflexes.

For some, they'll reject culture's message entirely. Scripture tells us to do something, and we should do it. If we have truth, we speak it forthrightly in any and every situation.

For others, they'll reject Scripture. They believe our era has learned from the mistakes of the past. Why accept these antiquated teachings?

One wonders, though, if these two reactions present a false choice. Might there be aspects of the current era's bent that are, in fact, a correction to the past? Might some of these corrections actually align with Scripture rather than reject it? Every era has its blind spots. Maybe we can take a step back from it all in hopes of discovering a way of life that truly *loves people*.

Tension

There is a tension—a distinction—we must carefully and thoughtfully make. On the one hand, we know there are times when healthy encouragement, instruction, or exhortation must be given to a friend. To neglect this can be unloving—even irresponsible—when we see genuine need in a friend's life. At the same time, we instinctively know the importance of respect for others. Just as we are in process, we must respect the process of others. Consider two statements:

If we exhort without respecting, we are overbearing.

If we respect without exhorting, we are irresponsible.

One of Scripture's most direct commands to fathers states this: "*Fathers, do not exasperate your children*" (Ephesians 6:4). It's an interesting command. Why give it to dads? Most likely because dads often bend toward nagging their kids. The best of intentions can leave kids exasperated and embittered. For a dad, respecting his children would mean remembering they are in process and they're going to make mistakes.

But slide too far away from exhortation, and a different error is made. The full context of the command to fathers is telling: "*Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord*" (Ephesians 6:4).

Dads are commanded to train their kids. As they grow, children need guidance. Not only for the many competencies we all need in life, but also in what it means to follow Christ. This does not mean children won't make their own decisions about matters of faith; we respect those. But intentionally training the next generation can protect them from making many of the mistakes we ourselves have made.

Other examples abound. College roommates will know each other well. Encouraging and exhorting each other is a loving thing to do. Nagging each other is not. Co-workers will see things in one another they will not see in themselves. Helping sharpen a co-worker's effectiveness is both generous and loving, especially in competitive situations. A line can be crossed, though, when helping a co-worker becomes belittling or controlling. It's critical we dig deeply into both sides of this tension in hopes of discovering Scripture's true wisdom.

Respect

Jesus was the master at loving those whose values differed deeply from his own. An accusation made against him is quite telling.



The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." But wisdom is proved right by her deeds.

(Matthew 11:19)

This description is in stark contrast to the religious leaders of Christ's day. Jesus lived in an era where *exhortation* ruled, and separation from those who had different views was the common practice. In the midst of this culture, Jesus was known as a "friend of sinners." Not only was he unafraid of those who differed from him, but he respected them and displayed genuine love for them by spending time with them. Even more, their time together was not him relentlessly pounding them with truth. He dined with them...so much so that some mistook him for a glutton and a drunkard.

Paul carried on Jesus' example in many ways. One of the clearest instances in Scripture is when he stepped into the city of Athens. Paul was Jewish and well-versed in Scripture. He knew the numerous exhortations in Scripture against idolatry. The second of the ten commandments reads: "*You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them*" (Exodus 20:4-5). To craft an idol and bow down to it was deeply offensive to the Jewish perspective. "*While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols*" (Acts 17:16).

We know this feeling. It's the feeling we get when we're convinced friends have been duped by deception. They're engaging something—a relationship, a practice, a belief—that we're convinced has a destructive trajectory. Love drives our distress because we want them to be okay. We want better things than the destructive harvest they will reap from the seeds they are sowing. What does Scripture teach us to do? What did Paul do with the people in Athens?

With his Jewish training in mind, consider Paul's opening comments to the Athenians. "*Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious*" (Acts 17:22).

He didn't open by blasting their idolatry. He didn't jab his finger in the air or declare them deceived. Rather, he lightly commended them. Yes, he disagreed with the object of their devotion, but he respected the fact that they were a devoted people.

Paul's entire comments reveal more. As he gently instructs, he does so not by referencing the Scriptures he knew so well, but instead he quotes their own philosophers and poets. Hear the following carefully.

From one man [God] made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. "For in him we live and move and have our being."

(Acts 17:26-28)

That last line, "*For in him we live and move and have our being,*" is from the Cretan writer, Epimenides. It comes from a poem titled *Cretica*, written 600 years before Christ; and in the poem, the statement comes from the mouth of Minos, the son of the Greek god,



Zeus. So Paul, who passionately advocates for the Son of God, is doing so by quoting the son of Zeus.

Paul then goes on to quote a second poet. *“As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’”* (Acts 17:28)

This second quote comes from a Cilician poet named Aratus who wrote, *“It is with Zeus that every one of us in every way has to do, for we are also his offspring.”* Knowing Paul, this is stunning. Paul references a quote about Zeus to teach a truth about God. We know enough about Paul to know his doing so as not an endorsement Zeus, but this shows the extent to which Paul goes to respect his listeners and find common ground.

Paul’s example is reflected in the writing of Peter. Peter tells his readers, *“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect”* (1 Peter 3:15).

So both Peter and Paul follow Jesus’ lead. They don’t wag their fingers in the faces of those who differ. They don’t talk down to people or belittle their way of living. Rather, they respect them.

But what about the other side of the tension? What about the need to exhort, instruct; and yes, at times, correct?

Exhortation

Let’s consider exhortation and correction from the perspective of the recipient. We’ve all received the correction of another. Scripture, and Proverbs in particular, says a great deal about the display of both wisdom and foolishness related to receiving the exhortation of others. Consider the following carefully.

“Whoever heeds life-giving correction will be at home among the wise” (Proverbs 15:31).

“Do not rebuke mockers or they will hate you; rebuke the wise and they will love you” (Proverbs 9:8).

“Like an earring of gold or an ornament of fine gold is the rebuke of a wise judge to a listening ear” (Proverbs 25:12).

“Mockers resent correction, so they avoid the wise” (Proverbs 15:12).

These observations from Scripture reflect the struggle we ourselves experience when we receive the correction of others. On the one hand, we value the wisdom and insight of others. We benefit from it and want it.

On the other hand, instruction from others is a sensitive matter. We don’t walk through life inviting rebukes. We’ve received both humble and haughty correction. When done well, we may flinch, but we instinctively know it’s good. When done poorly, we react no matter the truth or falsehood of what is being delivered.

With that in mind, consider a reality we must carefully consider: *“A person’s own folly leads to their ruin, yet their heart rages against the Lord”* (Proverbs 19:3).

Foolishness leads to ruin. We’ve seen it. We’ve experienced it. If we ourselves are racing toward destructive ends, we want a friend to tap us on the shoulder and a point us toward a better way. Initially we may react negatively. We may brush the instruction aside. But in



our quiet moments we wonder and think, *Maybe I should listen...maybe I should consider the counsel. Might there be something to it?* And sometimes we humbly change course and are grateful for the courage of the person who spoke up.

Part of us does believe in exhortation. We believe it because we know that there are times we ourselves need it. When done well, we know correction is an act of love.

What does Scripture teach about bringing correction? Consider Jesus' straight talk on the matter.

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.
(Matthew 7:1-6)

Three paragraphs with three big ideas.

First, when correction is coupled with judgment, it is summarily rejected. Friends will more readily receive correction when it's coupled with humility. Exhortation is most emphatically not synonymous with judgment. That's an implication of the first paragraph of Jesus' teaching and the first big idea of this teaching.

Second, correction that comes from a person's experience is far more welcomed and effective than correction that comes from textbook knowledge. Before helping a friend with his or her "speck," we're to get the "plank" out of our own eye. Not only does this protect us from playing the hypocrite, but it also offers a helpful starting point. Others are far more interested in our exhortations when they know how our convictions have brought hope and healing in our own lives first.

And third, we must recognize that some are simply not ready. Because of this, Jesus teaches to "*not give dogs what is sacred*" and to "*not throw your pearls to pigs.*" This is strong language, but it's reality. Receptivity matters. When we rush to bring correction, we may do more harm than good by inoculating our friends to our counsel because they've "heard it all before."

Proverbs observes the difficult spot this puts us in. "*Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes* (Proverbs 26:4-5).

What is the command in this passage? First we read, "*Do not answer a fool according to his folly.*" But then we read, "*Answer a fool according to his folly.*" So which is it? Are we to address the folly of the fool, or are we to keep our mouths shut and let them be?

The contradictory commands make it clear that this isn't a command at all, but an observation about reality. It's describing the challenging situation we may find ourselves in when those we love are committed to dangerous ways. On the one hand, we know when



a person's not ready to hear our thoughts. So when the Scripture says that if we answer a fool according to his folly, we will be just like him, we get it. Our conversation with that friend will leave us looking and feeling like a fool.

But to not address the issue means the person living in foolishness continues on and is "wise in his own eyes." When we love this person, it's extremely challenging. We're stuck. If we act, it will backfire; if we don't act, he or she continues on. When Jesus teaches to not cast our pearls before swine, he seems to be saying there are times it's best to keep our mouths shut, pray, and wait.

With all that said, we might think that's a lot to process when considering bringing exhortation. Is it really worth it? Is this something we should really do? Such questions lead to critical thoughts of both opportunity and responsibility.

Opportunity and Responsibility

James addresses the opportunity...

If one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

(James 5:19-20)

Samuel addresses the responsibility.

As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right. But be sure to fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you. Yet if you persist in doing evil, both you and your king will perish.

(1 Samuel 12:23-25)

When it comes to exhortation, we have both an opportunity and a responsibility. When we lovingly come alongside others, we may be *saving them from death and covering over a multitude of sins*. To do so is a tremendous act of love. Often, to do so will also be our very responsibility. As prophet to Israel, Samuel recognized this. To neglect prayer for his people, to neglect teaching and exhorting them, for him would be rebellion. God had given him responsibility; so he would persevere in fulfilling that responsibility to the end of his days, no matter how welcomed or rejected he'd be.

Revealing

As is so often the case with loving people, stewarding the tension between exhortation and respect reveals a great deal about ourselves and the centrality of our relationship with God. To walk this tension well, we absolutely must be centered. Courage is needed at all points on the spectrum.

It takes courage to exhort. When we step into another person's life, share our own story, and do our best to love them by offering guidance, we make ourselves vulnerable. Will they be offended? Will they push back? Will they misunderstand our intentions? This is the risk we take, but it's worth it.

It also takes courage to respect those who differ from us, find common ground, and listen carefully to a range of lifestyles and views. To do so puts our own convictions to the test. It



makes us vulnerable to correction or to our own perspectives being challenged. We will be misunderstood by those who think we should be more dogmatic, just as Jesus was.

People who are centered, those who have God as their God, will have the much-needed conviction that frees them to thoughtfully engage others despite the risk it brings to themselves. If we are going to authentically love people, we cannot worship people. We cannot be controlled by their opinions and perspectives. In no place is this seen more clearly than when we seek to be catalysts for good in the lives of others.

But what if we did it? What if we found the wisdom and the courage to both exhort and respect, instruct and accept, speak and listen? The Apply exercise associated with this spiritual outcome is designed to help us with these very things.

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