

## A Teachable Life

Proverbs 9:7-9

Pat Conroy wrote a book about his senior year as the point guard on the basketball team for the Citadel during the season of 1966-67. The book is entitled *My Losing Season*. Entering that season Conroy thought they would have one of the best teams in the history of the Citadel. But as the season progressed, Conroy writes, they “perfected the art of falling to pieces.” The losses were not the worst part of that season; by far, the most painful aspect of that season was Conroy’s relationship with his coach. His coach took every opportunity to humiliate him and to make it clear that he didn’t believe in him. As Conroy brought the ball down the court, his coach would often yell out, “Conroy, don’t shoot the ball.”

Almost thirty years after that season, Conroy, who had become an author, began running into old teammates at book signings. He hadn’t kept up with a single guy from his team. But he came to realize that unless he wrote about his losing season, he would never get past the shame and frustration that he had experienced. Conroy points out that sports books are almost always written about winners and winning teams. But he wrote about his losing season because, he writes, losing is “a fiercer, more uncompromising teacher” than winning.

*My Losing Season* was a tragic story to me – not because their season was so disappointing (that’s common) or even because Conroy’s coach was humiliating (also rather common). I found it to be tragic because he lived in frustration and shame for 30 years. It broke my heart to read that there was nobody in his life who could help him deal with his pain and point him away from the self-destructive habits that were obvious to everybody: alcoholism, anger, etc.

It makes we wonder how many of us here today are living in isolation without anybody else in a position to help us understand what is going on in our lives. What a tragedy if we don’t have trusted friends who can help us learn the lessons that our failures are trying to teach us.

We are in the midst of a series from the book of Proverbs about the fear of the Lord. When we fear God we have a passion for aligning our lives with God’s life. Today we are going to consider some Scriptures that suggest that we should actually invite others to correct us and tell us anything we need to hear. It’s never easy, but it’s necessary. Rather than living in isolation, we welcome the input that others can give. Please turn with me to Proverbs 9:7-9 as we talk about “A Teachable Life.”

***Two Reactions to Correction: the scoffer and the wise. (Proverbs 9:7-9)*** The immediate context of these verses is significance. Chapter 9 begins with Lady Wisdom extending an invitation and ends with the “woman of folly” also extending an invitation. These two ladies are the bookends of this chapter. The contrast between them couldn’t be starker.

Lady Wisdom has a house that is rock solid with seven pillars hewn out of stone. She has taken great care to prepare her food, mix her wine, and set her table. She sends out her maids to invite the simple/naïve to come and enjoy the well-prepared meal and to gain understanding and knowledge. The result will be life (v. 6)

By contrast, the “woman of folly” is loud, undisciplined, and without knowledge (v. 13). She is also inviting “the simple” to enter her house and enjoy a meal. But instead of wine that has been

carefully mixed, she is offering “stolen water.” She is also offering “food eaten in secret,” implying that it also has been attained through intrigue. The appeal involves the thrill of doing something illicit. What they aren’t told is that dining with the woman of folly will mean death instead of life (v. 18).

These two women who form the bookends of this chapter are a literary representation of the two paths we can take: the path of life and the path of death. Between these two bookends we have three verses addressing the importance of being teachable. In a style characteristic of wisdom literature, there are *two distinct responses* to reproof/correction: that of the scoffer and that of the wise. One chooses life and the other chooses death. First, this is what you can expect if you “correct a scoffer.”

7 He who corrects a scoffer gets dishonor for himself,  
And he who reproves a wicked man gets insults for himself.  
8 Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you,  
Reprove a wise man and he will love you.

There is a category of person in the book of Proverbs called “the scoffer.” The scoffer not only rejects instruction but also mocks people who do accept instruction. This is the person who makes fun of you for what you believe and for the lifestyle you’ve adopted.

If you try to correct or reprove a scoffer, you’d better be prepared for a reaction. Verses 7 and 8 say that you can expect dishonor, insults, and hatred. And so we are advised, “Do not reprove a scoffer.” Don’t even try to correct a scoffer because things will get worse, not better. On the one hand, nobody is so far gone that God can’t soften his/her heart and make them teachable. On the other hand, we have to realize that some people have effectively cut themselves off from any help you can offer them. Jesus addressed the same basic reality when He said, “Do not throw your pearls before swine” (Mt. 7:6). Why? Because pigs really don’t appreciate pearls. Pigs will “trample [pearls] under their feet” and will “turn and tear you to pieces.”

There are a lot of reasons *why* scoffers (or people in general) don’t like to be corrected. Perhaps the core reason involves pride. To some people looking competent and “in control” is *much more important* than living well. If you approach that person and say, “I’m concerned about you; I’ve noticed that you’re not very patient with people,” you better watch out. You are suddenly the enemy; your correction will be interpreted as an attack; you can expect dishonor, insults, and hatred. It won’t be pretty.

You get a very different reaction if you correct a “wise man.” In the book of Proverbs, the wise are on the right path, but they are not perfect; and they know they aren’t perfect. They know that they need the insights of other people.

8 Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you,  
Reprove a wise man and he will love you.  
9 Give instruction to a wise man and he will be still wiser,  
Teach a righteous man and he will increase his learning.

“Reprove a wise man and he will love you.” The wise love those who reprove them because the wise want wisdom and truth above everything else. They have the attitude, “If you have insight

that can help me live better, I want to hear it.” Instead of resenting the reproof of others, the wise welcome others’ reproof. Instead of hating those who correct or instruct them, they *love* such people! That’s because a wise person cares more about living well than looking good.

The wise understand that we all have blind spots. When you drive a car, you need to understand the concept of blind spots. Even though you look in your mirrors, it is possible that another car is behind you on the right or the left. If you don’t take a quick look over your shoulder before you change lanes, you might cause a crash. In light of our passage today, I would make the obvious point that the person in the other car can see your blind spots perfectly; what is a blind spot to you is obvious to others.

The wise person understands, “I have blind spots that others can see quite clearly. I’d be foolish to think that a person who corrects me is an enemy; that person is my friend. Since I don’t want to ‘crash’ I welcome the correction of others.” For example, we often have blind spots in relation to how we treat those who are closest to us – family, roommates, etc. We’re generous and patient with others, but we are often selfish and impatient toward those we’re around every day. Sometimes it’s a blind spot – we don’t realize our inconsistency. A wise person wants others to point out such inconsistencies because s/he cares more about living well than looking good.

I suspect that most of us are a mixed bag when it comes to whether or not we receive correction and reproof from others: we are able to receive some correction from some people in some circumstances. Other times we don’t want to hear anything from anybody. The goal is to get to the place where receiving correction is a common, natural thing in our lives – something that we actually welcome.

Not too long ago I got a big, long email from a friend who had noticed something in my life that concerned him. At first I didn’t want to hear it. Actually my gut reaction was to be defensive and offended and misunderstood. But God gave me the grace to hear what was being said. It was obviously motivated by love and concern for me. Looking back, I thank God for such a good friend. Even though I don’t like being corrected, I’d rather see my blind spots than crash.

***Habits that prepare us to receive the correction of others.*** I’d like to suggest a couple of ongoing habits that can help us become the type of people who welcome the correction of others. These habits provide the larger context. The book of Proverbs (and all of Scripture really) advocate having a teachable lifestyle in which we open to wisdom and correction. Receiving correction and instruction from other people is only part of a larger pattern of teachability.

***Habit #1 - Receiving correction from the Scriptures.*** The book of Proverbs advocates seeking wisdom as if it were hidden treasure. The primary place we seek such wisdom is in the Scriptures. Listen to Paul’s classic statement in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 about the function of “scripture” – the writings of the Old Testament.

16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; 17 so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

The Scriptures have the ability to “correct” and “reprove” us if we allow them. For example, you might read the account in Matthew 8 in which a great storm arose while Jesus was asleep in the boat. The disciples came unglued and thought they were going to drown. Jesus’ comment was, “Why are you afraid, you men of little faith?” Then Jesus calms the storm. You might be pondering that passage and realize, “I’m just like the disciples. I am full of fear at what might happen in a relationship (or in my job, or in my finances) when I have every reason to be full of faith.” You have just received correction from the Scriptures. Such reproof from the Scriptures should be common in our lives.

***Habit #2 - Receiving correction from God as our heavenly Father.*** Receiving correction from the Scriptures and from God are obviously related. Scripture provides the foundation of everything God does in our lives. But I think it’s important to remember that we’re not being corrected by a book of truth; we are being corrected by God Himself. Both the old and new testaments emphasize that God is a heavenly Father who corrects us because He loves us. The wise understand and accept such correction. Proverbs 3:12 says:

12 For whom the LORD loves He reproves,  
Even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights.

The father and mother who want the very best for their children don’t watch passively as their children grow up. They know that they have knowledge and insight that their children need to live healthy lives. And so we correct our children when we see things in their lives that we know will cause heartache as they grow older. Such correction is a basic expression of love. In the same way, our heavenly Father corrects us because He loves us. He doesn’t throw up His hands and say, “Whatever . . .” He patiently, persistently disciplines His children. A wise person will receive such correction from God.

What I’m describing is a lifestyle of teachability. If you and I are in the habit of receiving correction from the Scriptures and from God, it is much more likely that we will also be able to receive correction from each other. If we are humbling ourselves before God, we will have the capacity to humble ourselves before others and “hear” what they have to say in our lives. The converse is also true: If we don’t humble ourselves before God, there’s little likelihood that we will be able to receive correction from others.

There is one last issue that we need to consider or else nothing we’ve said so far will make any difference. We need to consider who is qualified to ***give*** correction/reproof. But who among us is going to be willing to take the risk of entering into others’ lives and telling them things they need to hear? We can conclude from Scripture that:

***A Final Perspective: Only those who receive correction are also qualified to give correction.***

Unless we are willing to receive correction from others, both our methods and our motives will be wrong when we try to correct others. This is somewhat of a common sense observation. Only the person who receives instruction understands how difficult it is to hear that you have something in your life that needs to be changed. Only that person understands how devastating it can be when a person corrects you out of anger. Only that person understands how healing it can be when a person corrects you out of love and compassion.

Everything Proverbs says about “the tongue” applies to correcting others. Proverbs 15:2 says:

2 The tongue of the wise makes knowledge acceptable,  
But the mouth of fools spouts folly.

A wise person asks the question, “How can I say what I need to say in a way that this person can ‘hear’ it? What will give me the greatest probability of teaching this person what s/he needs to learn?” A fool, on the other hand, could care less about the other person. When somebody says, “I just need to get this off my chest,” watch out.

Jesus said (Matthew 7) that we’re putting ourselves in a dangerous position if all we want to do is judge other people. Jesus uses the term “hypocrite” to describe the person who wants to correct others but not be corrected. It’s as if that person has a “log” in his eye – a huge issue that he’s unwilling to face – when the other person only has a speck in his eye. Jesus told the hypocrite to take the log out of his own eye so that he will “see clearly to take the speck out of [his] brother’s eye.” The goal is to be in a position to help other people: to have the humility necessary to be of genuine benefit to other people who have things in their lives that shouldn’t be there. *Only those who receive correction are qualified to give correction.*

This principle applies to all sorts of relationships in which we might correct another person. Think about parenting for example. Eugene Peterson has written a book about “Growing Up with Your Teenager.” His observation is that many Christian parents have stopped growing and developing in middle age without realizing it. As a result, their parenting is merely an attempt to preside over the growth of their children. When that’s the case, parenting is little more than a series of lectures. How much better if we as parents are engaged in the same process of growth that we are urging upon our children! Unless we as parents are teachable, how can we expect our children to be teachable? Peterson points out that this is “the old practice of apprenticeship applied to family life.” We allow our children to see us live out the Christian life with all its messiness and ambiguity. We let them see our sins and our repentance. We let them see us take the log out of our own eyes so that we are in a position to take the speck out of theirs.

In the body of Christ we *have* to be people who both receive and who give correction (both teachable and willing to teach). I’ll close with two questions: First, is there anybody in your life to whom you have said, “If you see anything in my life that concerns you, you have the freedom to bring it up”? If you haven’t – either explicitly or implicitly – I’d encourage you to think and pray about doing so.

Second, are you willing to take the risk involved in correcting others – first addressing issues in your life so that you see clearly enough to help others? This willingness is vital for the body of Christ to grow up as it should.