

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver St.  
Flagstaff, AZ 86001  
[www.fcfonline.org](http://www.fcfonline.org)

## THE MINISTRY OF CORRECTION

1 Timothy 5:1-2

By

Steven J. Cole

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Lesson 15

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1 Timothy 5:1-2  
(Also, Matthew 18:15-17; Galatians 2:11-14; 6:1)

If you've ever done any boating, you know how essential it is to stay on course. If you steer just a few degrees off the desired course, you can wind up far from where you wanted to go. I read once of a shipwreck that happened because a sailor broke off the small tip of his knife blade while he was cleaning the ship's compass. He didn't remove it, and that little bit of metal pulled the compass off its true reading, resulting in the ship's running aground. A slight deviation, if left uncorrected, can result in great devastation.

It's the same spiritually. Correction is not a nicety; it's a necessity. If our lives veer off-course and continue in that wrong direction, it can result in shipwreck of our faith. Because of that fact, God wants every believer to be involved in the ministry of correction. Often a brother or sister is off course and doesn't know it. God calls us to correct that person in love.

The ministry of correction is essential in the family of God.

It's essential, but never easy. I dislike nothing in ministry more than to have to confront someone with sin in his life. But it must be done. As I emphasized last week, every believer is in the ministry. And one of the most helpful ministries you can perform is the ministry of correction. Quite often, you can correct a member of the body whom I or the elders cannot effectively correct, because you know the person better than we do. He is your friend, so he's more likely to listen to you than to someone he doesn't know. But it's still not easy to do.

Today I want to talk on how to carry out this ministry of correction properly. We will examine Paul's instructions to Timothy (1 Tim. 5:1-2); but we will also go to some other Scriptures to give us the big picture. I encourage you to take some notes, because you are not exempt from this ministry. Some of you know of fellow believers who need correction. But you haven't gone to them in

love and offered correction. Maybe you don't know how or maybe you're chicken. But you're not loving your brother or sister if you let them head toward shipwreck and don't try to correct him or her.

We will look first at some hindrances to this ministry; then at some preliminary questions; finally, at the procedure.

#### HINDRANCES TO CORRECTION:

There are a number of barriers which prevent us from correcting those who need it. These need to be removed if we want God to use us in this vital ministry.

##### 1. Fear

We're chicken! It's threatening to confront someone who is out of line. I'll be honest: I struggle with anxiety when I have to correct anyone.

How do you overcome this fear? The only thing that helps me is to fear God more than men and to realize that God will hold me accountable if I see someone going astray and do not warn them and seek to correct them. So I do it out of obedience to God.

If your kids, without your knowledge, were playing on a dangerous street, and if another adult saw them in danger and merely shook his head and said, "They shouldn't do that, they'll get hurt," you would be angry if you found out about it. You would say, "You mean to tell me that you saw my kids in danger, and you didn't do anything about it? Don't you care about anyone except yourself?"

In the same way, God isn't pleased when we see one of His children, whom He purchased with the blood of His own Son, straying onto a dangerous path while we merely look, shake our heads and say, "He shouldn't do that; he'll get hurt," but do nothing about it.

If you care, you must confront. You must warn the person of the danger of His ways, if for no other reason, at least to absolve yourself of responsibility (Acts 20:26-27; Ezek. 3:17-21). Sheep are valuable to the Shepherd (Acts 20:28). If we love Him, they must also be valuable to us.

If you are faithful in this ministry of correction, you'll often get accused of not being loving. But love is not syrupy sentiment. If someone is heading downstream toward a waterfall, is it loving to stand by shaking your head and watching the person cruise toward destruction, or is it loving to do all you can to warn him? Real love has the courage to confront someone who is going astray. We're all accountable to God to love others. Obedience to God means that we must swallow our fears and correct those we know of who are going astray.

2. A misunderstanding of Matthew 7:1--"Do not judge lest you be judged."

This is one of the most misapplied verses in the Bible. We see another believer engaging in sin or heading in a wrong direction and we say, "Well, the Bible says, 'Judge not,' so I can't judge what he's doing. It's none of my business."

If that's what Jesus meant, it would be impossible to shepherd anyone! To minister to people, you must honestly evaluate where they're at in their walk with Christ and do whatever you can to help them move more toward where they ought to be.

Jesus was talking about hypocritically condemning others for their sins, while you ignore major sins in your own life. He didn't say that we aren't to remove specks from our brother's eye. He did say that we are to deal with the log in our own eye first. That leads to another hindrance:

3. Awareness of personal sins

Sometimes we're hesitant to correct others because we know we have sin in our lives that needs to be cleaned up. If we went to correct a sinning brother, he could point the finger back at us and say, "What about you?" So we don't say anything.

If that's the case, then the obvious solution is, deal with your sins! Confess them to the Lord and turn from them. It is those who are spiritual (spiritually mature) who are to help restore those caught in sin (Gal. 6:1). They do it cognizant of their own propensity toward sin ("looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted"), but not with any known, unconfessed sin in their lives.

4. Laziness

It's always easier *not* to confront or correct someone. *Always!* It's always a hassle. It takes effort to arrange a time and get together so that you can deal with the issue. But laziness is hardly a good excuse if a person is heading toward spiritual ruin. Love takes effort. Somewhere we got this crazy idea that love is a spontaneous, effortless feeling. But if love just flowed naturally, we wouldn't have to be commanded so often to do it. To obey, you have to confront your love of self above others, which is where laziness comes from. If you love someone, you're willing to inconvenience yourself to help the other person become what God wants him to be.

#### 5. Relative morality

We live in a culture that believes there are no moral absolutes and that tolerance is the chief virtue. The church has been tainted by this, as seen when a Christian sees another believer doing something clearly against God's Word, but he rationalizes, "Well, it wouldn't be right for me to do that, but maybe it's okay for him."

But if it's against God's Word, it's wrong for anyone. Period! God's Word is our unchanging standard. If someone is violating His Word, then we have the responsibility to correct him in the proper way. Correction assumes that there is such a thing as absolute right and wrong, revealed in God's Word.

#### 6. Uncertainty as to whether or not to correct

This is the hardest area for me. Sometimes it's a judgment call to know whether a problem will correct itself or whether it needs my involvement. Some Christians ride around with their biblical six-shooter and whenever they see someone slightly out of line, with lightning speed they let him have it right between the eyes with a well-chosen verse. But often they do it out of spiritual pride, not love, and it usually does more harm than good.

We need sensitivity to the Holy Spirit to know when to let something go and when to move in with correction. If you know someone who is engaging in obviously sinful behavior, then correction is not optional. You may not be the one to do it, but you can't let it go without making sure that it gets done (Gal. 6:1). Also, if there is a major doctrinal issue at stake which is affecting many people, you must confront it (Paul and Peter, Gal. 2:11-14). Cor-

rection is also needed when you detect a wrong or dangerous habit-pattern in someone's life. For example, if you as a Christian man know a brother who is always checking out and flirting with women, you need to help him before he gets into worse trouble.

Beyond these guidelines, you must be sensitive to the Holy Spirit's promptings in your own life to know whether or not you should correct someone. I recommend that you study Scripture for models, especially how Jesus and Paul corrected others.

Assuming that you have removed the hindrances and you think that God wants you to correct a brother or sister, how do you go about it? I want to give you seven questions to ask yourself before you go to the person; and then, seven guidelines for giving biblical correction.

#### PRELIMINARIES TO CORRECTION:

##### 1. Is my life an example?

In 1 Timothy 4:12, Paul exhorts Timothy to set an example of godliness. From that foundation, he then can appeal to older men and women, as well as to those younger than himself (5:1-2). (Note also Acts 20:26-27, 31, 33-35; Paul admonished the Ephesian elders from the basis of setting a godly example.) This doesn't mean that you must be perfect, but it does mean that you are walking uprightly with God.

##### 2. Do I have an adequate relationship with the person?

In 1 Timothy 5:1-2, Paul tells Timothy to couch the ministry of correction in family-like relationships, treating the older men as fathers, the older women as mothers, the younger men as brothers, and the younger women as sisters. (See also Acts 20:37-38; 1 Thess. 2:7-11).

It's not always possible to have a deep relationship with those we must correct. But as a rule, the most effective correction takes place when the other person knows from experience that you love him.

##### 3. Do I have the facts?

Proverbs 18:13 states, "He who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him." Biblical communication is

based on truth. Before you correct someone, you need to make sure that you have the full truth about what is going on, and not just one side (Prov. 18:17) and not hearsay.

#### 4. Do I have the right motives and objectives?

Your motive should be to obey God by loving your neighbor (Matt. 22:39). Your objectives should be to restore the person to a right relationship with God and others and to help him grow to maturity in Christ (Matt. 18:15; Gal. 6:1; Col. 1:28). You need to check your heart before you go.

Your goal is not to embarrass or ridicule the other person. Nor is it to prove yourself right and the other person wrong. Your goal isn't "to give the other person a piece of your mind," or "to put him in his place" or "to get it off your chest." If you take pleasure in doing it, you probably shouldn't do it until you examine your own heart. Remember, your motive should be love and your goal should be to build up the person in Christ.

#### 5. Do I have the right wording?

Jesus says (Matt. 18:15) that we are to "reprove" our brother with a view to winning him. "Reprove" was a legal word used of a lawyer convincing the court of his case. Any attorney worth his salt thinks through what to say and how to say it so as to convince the judge and jury of the truthfulness of his case. So we need to think carefully about what we're going to say so that our brother will be reconciled with God and with anyone he has sinned against.

The classic biblical example is Nathan when he went to confront King David about his sins of adultery and murder. He told David a story about a rich man who was unwilling to slaughter one of his many lambs, but instead took a poor man's pet lamb and slaughtered it for his dinner guest. When David grew angry at this injustice, Nathan sprung his trap by saying, "You are the man!" David was broken with repentance (2 Sam. 12:1-7). Remember, the goal is to help restore your brother, not blow him away or prove that you're right and he's wrong.

#### 6. Is it God's time for me to go?

When David sinned with Bathsheba the Lord waited about one year, and then sent Nathan. Before that, David probably

wouldn't have listened. As it was, he was miserable in his guilt, so he was ready for God's way out (Psalms 38, 51). You must be sensitive to the Holy Spirit as to the right timing.

It's usually not God's time for you to correct someone if you haven't spent time praying about it. A good rule is, "Don't approach a person about a problem until you have approached God about the person." Sometimes God answers your prayers and you don't even have to go to the person. At other times, He will often work to prepare the other person's heart, and He will work on you to give you the right motives and goal.

7. Am I prepared to risk rejection and attack?

Even when you follow all of these preliminary steps, a person often will be defensive and angry at you. Many times he will respond by criticizing or attacking you. If you lose your cool and counterattack him, you just lost your ability to correct biblically. You can't take the person's attack on you personally. You're God's spokesman, and being a prophet is sometimes a hazardous job. But you just calmly stand your ground and keep speaking the truth in love.

After running through this check list of questions, follow this procedure:

PROCEDURE FOR CORRECTION:

1. Be as private as the wrong.

If it's a private matter, don't correct the person in front of others. Don't take someone with you at first if it is a strictly personal matter. Matthew 18:15-17 gives the order: First private confrontation, then one or two more with you, then church action (on a serious matter).

Some matters require public confrontation. In Galatians 2:11-14, Paul confronted Peter "in the presence of all." It was a public matter affecting many people, so Paul dealt with it publicly.

2. Be cautious and wise.

Paul tells Timothy to deal with the younger women as sisters "in all purity" (1 Tim. 5:2). Many pastors fall into sin because they disregard Paul's warning. I heard of one pastor who fell into adul-

tery with his secretary. The way it started was that he was on a crusade against pornography. He and his secretary were looking together at pornography that he was going to speak against! That's dumb, but it shows how if you play with the enemy, he'll eat you up!

If you don't want to fall over the cliff, don't go near the edge! You are not invincible. No matter how well-meaning you may be in trying to help another person with their problem, you are susceptible to the same sin (Gal. 6:1, "looking to yourselves, lest you too be tempted.")

### 3. Be direct and open.

Don't beat around the bush. Don't go behind the person's back and talk about the problem to others who aren't involved. In Galatians 2:11, Paul confronted Peter to his face. He didn't bring up the problem when Peter was not there and try to build support for his point of view. He spoke directly and openly.

### 4. Be humble, not judgmental.

You are a fellow sinner (Gal. 6:1). The next time, you may be the one needing correction. So you go in humility, with understanding. You do not attack the person, but try to help the person attack the problem.

### 5. Be gentle, but firm.

"Do not sharply rebuke" (1 Tim. 5:1). The word means, don't strike him with words. Don't ride roughshod over the person. "Appeal" is the same word translated "exhortation" in 4:13. It means to come alongside to help. Correcting or giving counsel is the same as teaching, except it's done personally, to help the individual see how Scripture applies to his situation. Many Scriptures that talk about correction also mention the need for gentleness (Gal. 6:1; 2 Tim. 2:25). Don't blast.

But also, don't let the person rationalize or minimize his sin or shift the blame. You may need to point out the gap between what he is saying and what he's doing. You may need to show him Scripture and ask, "How does what you said (or did) fit with what God's Word says?" You aren't helping him if you allow him to justify sin. You must be gentle, but firm.

6. Be able to point him to God's Word and to the necessary steps toward restoration.

God's Word is our common source of authority. You need to have your case for correction solidly built upon God's Word so that you can gently, but firmly, keep bringing the person back to the issue: What does the Bible say? You want him to know that his problem is not with you; it is with God, whose Word he is violating. Also, be able to direct him to some biblical steps of action. Confrontation alone is not sufficient; you must also bring restoration and healing through the Word. Your goal is to restore.

7. Be persistent if necessary.

Once may not be enough. (Acts 20:31, "night and day for three years ...") You don't give up if the person doesn't respond immediately. You may need to back off and continue praying while you wait for the right opportunity. You don't want to nag and drive him further away. But neither do you give up and say, "I tried once to correct him, but he just wouldn't listen!" Where would you be if the Lord gave up on you after His first attempt to correct you?

### Conclusion

Back during the Communist regime in Russia a joke was going around about Boris the Russian who arrived at the Pearly gates and was welcomed by St. Peter. Showing him around, Peter said, "You can go anywhere you want except on the pink clouds." "Why can't I go there?" Boris asked. "Because," Peter replied, "the pink clouds are reserved for those who did something great." "But I have done something great," Boris protested. "I made a speech at the Kremlin confronting the government and all the corrupt leaders." "Really," said Peter. "When did this happen?" Boris looked at his watch. "About two minutes ago."

One moral of that story is that confronting sin doesn't always work! Sometimes you pay a price! But we shouldn't do it because it works or doesn't work. We do it because God has commanded us to love one another. Part of love is this ministry of correction, done in the context of God's family, in the manner I have outlined today.

Some of you may not have immediate occasion to apply this. But you will soon, if you are committed to the ministry of building

people as God wants you to be. Others have immediate situations that require loving correction. I encourage you to obey the Lord in this matter. "My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins" (James 5:19-20).

### Discussion Questions

1. Which hindrance to correction is the most common excuse for not doing it? Can you think of others?
2. Many think of "confronting" as being abrasive. Others think "gentleness" means not being strong. Where's the biblical balance? Consider how Jesus corrected others.
3. What are some biblical guidelines for knowing when to let something go and when to confront?
4. What is the most difficult part of the ministry of correction for you? Why?

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