

WISDOM: LIVING SUCCESSFULLY IN A TREACHEROUS WORLD Accepting Correction

“Listen to counsel and accept discipline, that you may be wise the rest of your days” ~ *Proverbs 19:20*

The Painful Lesson of the Space Shuttle Challenger

If you were born before 1980, you probably remember where you were in the morning of January 28, 1986. At 11:39am EST, the Space Shuttle *Challenger* disintegrated seventy-five seconds after lift-off from its platform in Cape Canaveral, Florida. Seven crew members perished, including a schoolteacher—Christa McAuliffe—who was to teach a series of science lessons from space. The tragedy, however, etched into the history much different lessons than were expected.

Investigators determined that the cause of the *Challenger*'s destruction was a set of faulty O-rings in the massive booster engine designed to lift the shuttle into orbit. The cold conditions at the launch site before lift-off deteriorated the rubber seals, which later allowed a mechanical malfunction. Two-minutes into its ascent, structural failure occurred. The explosion of an engine led to the disintegration of the orbiter and the loss of seven lives.

What was most shocking, however, was the fact that the disaster could have easily been averted. NASA managers had been alerted to the potential failure of these rubber seals before the shuttle launch took place. But project managers disregarded the warnings and never took action to correct the problem. Alfred Poirier (“The Cross and Criticism,” 16) summarizes the lesson learned from this tragic event well:

The ultimate cause of the space shuttle disaster was pride. A group of top managers failed to listen carefully to the warnings, advice and criticisms given by those down the line who were concerned about the operational reliability of certain parts of the booster engine under conditions of abnormal stress. Just think: heeding criticism could have saved seven human lives.¹

The *Challenger* disaster stands out as one of the most vivid warnings about the danger of refusing correction. But the lesson it teaches is not new. Three thousand years ago, Solomon—a special recipient of divine wisdom (1 Kgs 3)—emphasized this same truth repeatedly in his teachings to his son: “He who neglects discipline despises himself, but he who listens to reproof acquires understanding” (Prov 15:32); and “A man who hardens his neck after much reproof will suddenly be broken beyond remedy” (Prov 29:1). An analysis of all of his inspired proverbs provides us with **at least eight truths** about the importance and role of correction in acquiring wisdom—the skill needed to live successfully before God.

1. The right attitude to correction begins with the acknowledgement of personal deficiency.

Biblical wisdom sees the world in very concrete categories. Anyone who rejects “the fear of the LORD” (1:29) is the *fool*, and the fool is one who is blind to his own poverty:

- **12:15** – “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel.”
- 14:12; 26:12; 28:26

A right attitude toward correction can only develop in tandem with a *negative, pessimistic, suspicious view of self* and *the self's ability to observe reality correctly*. This is one of the key implications of the doctrine of universal depravity.

- **22:15a** – “Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child.” Man is born in depravity.

¹ Alfred J. Poirier, “The Cross and Criticism,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1999), 16.

- **20:9** – “Who can say, ‘I have cleansed my heart, I am pure from my sin’?” Depravity is universal.

This right attitude begins at the moment when the fool’s eyes are supernaturally opened to his intellectual, moral, and spiritual bankruptcy, and when he turns to the LORD in humility, reverence, and trust (1:7; 8:13; 9:10; 14:27; 15:33). From that moment on, growth in wisdom is marked by a strengthening resolve to refuse to lean on self and instead put full confidence in the LORD and His description of reality (3:5-7).

“A leviathan iron-heartedness is the stubbornness of the flesh, not the triumph of the spirit.”
—Bridges, *Proverbs*, 28

2. The willingness to accept correction springs from a readiness to receive it from the Lord.

Those who have a hard time receiving correction are those who implicitly believe that the Lord has nothing to correct in them. Conversely, those willing to receive correction from others are those who believe that the Lord has much to change in them. They recognize that to enact this change, the Lord must use instruments—other human beings or the circumstances of life—to accomplish His purposes.

As such, Solomon emphasized to his son that he must establish a proper attitude toward the painful discipline that the Lord administers through these means. Once this attitude was in place, accepting correction from others would come much easier.

- **3:11-12** – “My son, do not reject the discipline of the LORD or loathe His reproof, for whom the LORD loves He reproves, even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights.”

As Waltke (*Proverbs 1-15*, 249) notes, Solomon’s words describe a “severe mercy.” The “severity” is the thoroughness of the Lord’s discipline. He will not hold back. The “mercy” is the faithfulness of the Lord’s love. It never wanes despite the need for this discipline. This concept was not new to Solomon; it is an echo of what Moses stated to the people of Israel in the Law (Deut 8:5). The importance of this principle is also evident in the attention given to it by the writer of Hebrews (Heb 12:3-11).

“The correction and advice that we hear are sent by our heavenly Father. They are His corrections, rebukes, warnings, and scoldings. His reminders are meant to humble me, to weed out the root of pride and replace it with a heart and lifestyle of growing wisdom, understanding, goodness, and truth.”
—Poirier, “The Cross and Criticism,” 19

3. The proof one is ready to accept correction is his transparency in confessing wrongdoing.

Whereas concealment intends to cover up the need for correction and project an image of strength, confession intends to acknowledge sin and project an image of need. The Lord resists the former but delights in the latter.

- **28:13** – “He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes *them* will find compassion.”
- **James 5:16** – “Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.”

ELEMENTS OF BIBLICAL CONFESSION (Heath Lambert, <i>Finally Free</i>, 79-86)
1. Confess your sin to all who have been touched by your sin.
2. Do not confess sin to those who are not touched by your sin.
3. Confess your sin with a willingness to accept the consequences of your sin.
4. Consider confessing your sin with a third party who can help with the response.

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| 5. Confess your sin thoroughly, but not necessarily exhaustively. |
| 6. Confess your sin without making any excuses for your sin. |

4. The willing acceptance of correction is a fundamental step to future success.

Solomon uses the law of cause-and-effect to emphasize the long-term benefit of accepting correction. This truth is one of the most repeated emphases in the entire book of Proverbs.

- **3:1-2** – “My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments; for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you.”
- **13:14** – “The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, to turn aside from the snares of death.”
- **13:18** – “Poverty and shame will come to him who neglects discipline, but he who regards reproof will be honored.”
- 6:23-24; 9:9; 10:17; 12:1; 19:20

Longman (*Proverbs*, 269) states,

The sages felt that mistakes provided opportunities for learning. They also apparently assumed that everyone would make mistakes along the way. What they could not tolerate, however, was an attitude of defensiveness that refuses to admit mistakes. True learners, truly wise persons, are those who desire to know when they have done wrong so that they can change their behavior.

This truth is recognized even in the world of secular education: “The answer to illusion and misjudgment is to replace subjective experience as the basis for decisions with a set of objective gauges outside ourselves, so that our judgment squares with the real world around us” (Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel, *Make It Stick*, 124).

5. The recognition of the need for correction expresses itself in a high esteem for those who give it.

Solomon teaches that a genuine receptivity to correction does not exist among those who harbor resentment toward those who administered admonishment. Integral to the right reception of correction is a high esteem for those who are loving, courageous, and wise enough to give administer it to those who need it.

- **9:7-8** – “He who corrects a scoffer gets dishonor for himself, and he who reproves a wicked man gets insults for himself. Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you, reprove a wise man and he will love you.”
- 27:5-6; 28:23

Ultimately, at the heart of any administration of correction is the issue of *esteem*. One will either esteem self (and express self-justification and resentment), or he will esteem the one who corrects.

6. The habitual acceptance of correction is clear evidence one is on the path to wisdom.

Wisdom never remains hidden in a man; it always discloses its existence. One of the ways wisdom does this is through a man’s lifestyle of teachability.

- **12:1** – “Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid.”
- **15:5** – “A fool rejects his father’s discipline, but he who regards reproof is sensible.”
- **15:31-32** – “He whose ear listens to the life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise. He who neglects discipline despises himself, but he who listens to reproof acquires understanding.”
- 15:14; 18:15; Psalm 141:5

Sadly, many Christian men will show some initial receptivity to correction without recognizing the real cost involved. They indicate openness to counsel, but later back away when they realize how hard the path of wisdom is. Jay Adams (*The Christian Counselor's Manual*) expresses this well:

Too many Christians give up. They want the change too soon. What they really want is change without the daily struggle. Sometimes they give up when they are on the very threshold of success. They stop before receiving. It usually takes at least three weeks of proper daily effort for one to feel comfortable in performing a new practice. And it takes about three more weeks to make the practice part of oneself. Yet, many Christians do not continue even for three days. If they do not receive instant success, they get discouraged. They want what they want now, and if they don't get it now, they quit.

7. The acceptance of correction in one's own life prepares him to give it appropriately to others.

Those in the best place to give correction are those who have most learned from it themselves. The best *teachers* are always those who were and are the best *learners*.

- **22:17-18** – “Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise, and apply your mind to my knowledge; for it will be pleasant if you keep them within you, that they may be ready on your lips.”
- **27:17** – “Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.”

The one whose heart has already undergone reproof and correction will be fit to speak to the errors of others. He has earned the authority and established the right approach. The one whose heart has resisted correction remains in his folly (10:32; 14:3; 18:6-7), and so can speak correction only with *hypocrisy*. In fact, those most fit to speak words of correction are often those who speak least aggressively. It is rare to find good counsel among those who believe it is their primary calling in life to go about censuring others.

8. The refusal to receive correction results in emotional, physical, and spiritual calamity.

Finally, Solomon leaves the reader of Proverbs with a solemn warning: refuse to receive correction, and you will suffer calamity:

- **1:24-27** – Wisdom says to the fool, “Because I called and you refused, I stretched out my hand and no one paid attention; and you neglected all my counsel and did not want my reproof; I will also laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your dread comes, when your dread comes like a storm and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you.”
- 13:13, 18; 15:10, 32; 19:18; 28:9; 29:1

One of the fundamental qualities of a fool is his stubbornness to *change*, even when warned (26:11; 27:11; 29:9). The way of the one who refuses correction is hard, and it ultimately leads to death.

For Further Reflection

- Continue to read one chapter of Proverbs each day.
- How does your recognition of *personal deficiency* work itself out in daily living?
- Recall the last time a brother attempted to correct you. Describe your response. Does it coincide with Solomon's teaching on the issue? What did you need to do differently?
- Do you have lingering feelings of resentment toward those who have attempted to admonish you in the past? In light of this study, what must you do with this resentment?
- Consider specific instances where you refused the admonition of another believer and that rejection resulted in disaster. Share the details—as a warning to others on the same path.

This Week's Audio: gracechurch.org/motw

Next Meeting: Oct 21 – Q&A with Dr. Owen Strachan