

They say that one of the most embarrassing things that can happen to an adult is for them to be told they are wrong. It's one thing to correct a child (and certainly children don't like to be told they're wrong either), but it's something entirely different to have to tell an adult they are just flat-out wrong. It's also something entirely different to *be* an adult and have to confront the notion that you are wrong. Depending on the situation, depending on the attitude of the person doing the correcting, it can be a tense, volatile event. In fact, I'd wager that most of us, given the choice, would rather just ignore whatever's going on than try to confront it if that were an option.

But there are times when that cannot be an option. There are times when we, as Christian brothers and sisters, need to correct someone who's wrong. If for no other reason the simple fact that God asks us to. There's more to it than that, of course, which we'll talk about, but if we didn't understand the whys it would be enough that God asks us and we trust him enough to do it. And so he tells us here through the apostle Paul, **"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently."** (v1). This is something we are called to do, something we need to do in the Lord.

Now, there are many things the Lord asks us to trust him blindly in, and rightly so, he is God and he does not owe us any explanations. But this is not one of those cases. Despite the awkwardness, despite the troubles of confrontation, there is *every* reason we need to do this when the situation arises. Paul addresses that himself later on in this section when he says, **"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life."** (v7,8). And here it is. Those left to follow the whims of the sinful nature will be destroyed. Those who are corrected and return to the path of the Spirit will inherit eternal life. There is nothing more important to correct than this. This is not just life and death that hang in the balance, it's *eternal* life and death. This is more important than stopping your nephew from marrying the wrong woman or choosing a bad career, this is as important as it gets.

However, we need to be very careful about the details of how we apply this, so let's take the time to examine this carefully. First of all, the question of whom we confront. If we're not reading carefully we come away with the direction "God tells us to correct sinners." That's a bit simplistic and can cause problems. After all, we all sin much and daily. If we were to try to do what that sounds like, we'd be a constant irritant to everyone around us and a drain on ourselves. No, rather notice what Paul says here, **"if someone is caught in a sin..."** We do sin much, and daily. But many of those sins are sins of weakness or error. We recognize them in ourselves, we know they are sins and we repent of them, we make an effort in the Spirit to avoid falling into them again. What Paul is speaking about here is the person trapped in a sin they either do not recognize, or are having trouble pulling themselves out of.

Because that is the danger that Paul speaks of when he talks about reaping what you sow. Sins are forgiven. And sins of error and weakness, while dangerous, do not persistently erode faith in Christ. But persistent, willful sin is reaping for destruction. We know that good deeds or bad do not earn us eternal life or not, of course. What counts is faith in the forgiveness of sins from our Savior Christ who died for them. But faith and the sinful nature are at odds inside us, and the more the sinful nature is fed, the more it is allowed to roam free, then the more the nature of the Spirit suffers and eventually is snuffed out. This is the danger when we allow someone to carry on who is trapped in sin. The danger that faith will eventually be destroyed and eternal life will be lost.

So this command of correction is to reach out to the believer who is trapped in sin. That first bit is just as important. The believer. What is accomplished if we correct an unbeliever? Nothing. For one, what reason do they have to change or even listen to us about what God says? None. But again, what is gained if we get them to stop doing whatever sinful thing they are doing? Nothing! The unbeliever must be led first to Christ to understand forgiveness and redemption. Then, in Christ, the healing can begin.

The devil would like nothing better than for us to take this directive of the Lord and use it in all the wrong places and in the wrong way. He would like for us to waste our time correcting the unbelievers to no real effect. He would like us to use it as an excuse to pick at the faults of others so we can feel better about ourselves. He wants us to use this directive to tell other people to stop doing that because it's wrong and we know what's right.

But that is not what God asks here. He tells us to correct our brothers and sisters *gently*. We are not to do it as someone lording the law over someone else. We are not to do it because "it's wrong!" We are to do it because they are in danger and we want to help. Again as it says here, **"if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you**

will fulfill the law of Christ.” (v1,2) Now the word “law” here in “law of Christ” doesn’t mean command as much as it means the persistent way of life that is life in Christ. We know that in Christ the law has been done away with through his sacrifice. And that’s what it’s all about. Not stopping sin because it’s against the rules, but stopping sin because it is the loving thing to do. And so we pursue this gently, recognizing as we said before, that no one *likes* to be corrected. We do it with gentleness, but also firmness. We do not compromise the word of God, we do not shy away from speaking the truth. But we speak and act in love, not something else.

And Paul gives us the key ingredient for maintaining the proper attitude as we do this in the next verses. He says, **“If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load.”** (v3-5). Paul almost gets a bit sarcastic here at the end of this section as he warns us against the kind of pride that prevents us from applying the correction from God properly. If we go out to correct others who are trapped in their sin, if we seek to help and restore them but are carrying false pride for ourselves in our own pocket, then we will probably fail spectacularly at what we are trying to do. We will more than likely drive away instead of restore. What are those thoughts that try to leak into our mind as we set off to “help” our brother or sister? You know what they sound like.

“How could they be so ignorant as to not realize what’s going on here?”

“How many times have we had to talk about this before? They’re clearly not even *trying*.”

“I’d never give in to something like this. What’s wrong with *them*?”

And then, even if it’s just subconsciously, we start to look down on the person we’re trying to help. And as Paul tells us here, we are looking down on them without any leg to stand on ourselves. If you think you are something when you are nothing, you deceive yourself. Examine yourself first. Test your own actions. You don’t have any giant blind spots? Sins you repeatedly give into despite your best efforts? You don’t have any areas where you are tempted more thoroughly than others? This is key to our understanding each other. We all have crosses to bear, areas we are more susceptible than others. But it is not up to you to judge the weight and difficulty of another’s cross. What is easy for you is torture for another. And vice versa. We must understand that none of us have any reason to have pride in ourselves before God or each other. There is no quality of better or worse, just different. If you find yourself comparing your life to others, you need to stop and start comparing your life to God’s standards. Neither of you measure up on your own, and it is only in the grace of Christ’s sacrifice that you measure up to God now. Treat each other as such, and it will give you the right attitude you need as you approach someone who needs to be restored.

And this is the attitude that we should have about ourselves when the time comes for each of us to be corrected. Don’t puff yourself up with the ridiculous notion that you are a capable, intelligent, human being who can take care of themselves just fine without any help. Don’t build up some silly notion that if someone has to correct you or offer you help that you’ve somehow failed as a person. As it says here, **“May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”** (v14). You have only one thing to take pride in, only one thing to stand on, and that is your savior Christ. You are a sinner, with all the blind spots, irrationality and liabilities that entails. Recognize and accept that in humility and then you will be able to receive correction for what it is, a genuine attempt in love to help you. Not with correction from humans, but from God himself through human agents.

As we keep this attitude about ourselves and each other strong, we will be able to help each other as we carry on to our heavenly home. And nothing is more important than reaching that home. Nothing else will last. There is no measure of pride worth giving that up, and any pride we think we have is a delusion anyway. As Paul encourages us here, **“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”** (v9,10). We carry on, together, in love. Recognizing that we are all equally unworthy of the blessings we have been given in God. Recognizing that in Christ we are all equally blessed with the promise of eternal life and the forgiveness of those sins. Through each other, allow the Lord to guide and correct you as necessary and use you in humility to help restore others properly, so that none of us may be lost along that road to heaven. Amen.