

Wisdom for Life: Listen to Reproof

Proverbs 15:31-33 (12:15)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on April 26, 2020

Introduction

- ❖ One thing that amazes me is how relevant and practical the Bible can be. I know that's not a widely held opinion. I know there are plenty of people who see the Bible as an ancient piece of literature – which they might respect for its antiquity – but they probably view its content as irrelevant and impractical in today's modern world.
 - But I wonder if opinions will change after this pandemic. Because now everyone is super-strict when it comes to washing hands, not touching unclean objects, and making sure to quarantine the contagious away from the camp. **I hope that people are starting to realize just how relevant and practical the scriptures can be.**

- ❖ If you read Leviticus, you'll find plenty of laws that require ritual cleansing and prohibit the eating of certain foods or the touching of unclean things. And I know they ultimately point to deeper spiritual realities made more clear in the NT – but they do make practical sense. If you Leviticus 11, you'll find a prohibition against eating certain winged creatures like bats. That's when you start to realize, **“Maybe the Bible knows what it's talking about. Maybe there is something here that is both spiritual *and* practical; abstract *and* applicable; conceptual *and* useful to my daily life.”**

- ❖ I'm seeing it that way, and especially as we've been studying the book of Proverbs. **The biblical teaching in this book is so grounded and practical.** It speaks to the day to day experiences we have. To the every day interactions with people. Last week, we looked at what Proverbs has to say about the power of our speech and how we should respond to angry words. **This morning, we're going to look at how we should respond to critical words – to words of correction, to words of rebuke, to words of reproof.**

- ❖ **We're going to see that biblical wisdom is measured by our ability to take criticism and receive reproof.** The wise, according to Proverbs, are the teachable. They're the ones who realize they don't have all the answers; and that they have blindspots; and that there's always room to grow and improve.
 - But unlike the wise, the foolish ignore advice. They don't solicit any feedback. And they react defensively to any criticism. They refuse to acknowledge blindspots. They're right in their own eyes. That's the teaching we'll see in Proverbs.
 - And just think of how practical this is. **The Bible is teaching that if you want to see growth and improvement in your various life pursuits, then you have to be willing to take criticism, to receive correction.**

- ❖ **Any successful athlete, artist, or musician will tell you that they didn't get where they are without receiving and taking to heart the critical feedback of past coaches and teachers.** And think about those highly-touted, high draft picks with so much potential – that was never reached because they refused to take instruction. They ignored criticism. They were too proud to accept any correction.

- ❖ This doesn't just apply to elite professionals. **If you want to be better and improve in your studies, in your career, in your marriage or your parenting – then you have to learn to take criticism and listen to reproof.** If you want to grow in your walk or be more fruitful in your ministry, then you'll need to learn from others.
 - This is practical biblical teaching. Now let's get into our text, and I want to show you three lessons that we can learn from (1) the foolish who forsake advice, (2) the wise who receive reproof, and (3) those who fear God and not man.

The Foolish Who Forsake Advice

- ❖ The first lesson goes like this: **The foolish who forsake advice will ultimately hurt themselves.** In other words, when you reject good advice, you're not just being unkind to the one who offered it – you're being unkind to yourself. You're doing yourself a disservice.
- ❖ Let's start with Proverbs 12:15 and a working definition of a biblical fool. *“The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.”* Now the fool is a character that shows up quite a bit in Proverbs. And there's more than one Hebrew word that's translated as “fool” in our English Bibles. **The word for fool (*kesil*) more commonly used in the Bible refers to someone who is dull or stubborn. And it's not so much a charge of intellectual dullness – but of moral dullness.**
 - It's not that the biblical fool has no knowledge of the truth. The problem is he has no reverence for it. He actually likes his folly – returning to it like a dog returns to its vomit (26:11). And the fool doesn't just reject the truth – he rejects God. **He has no reverence for the truth because he has no reverence for God.** There's no fear of God in him. Which Proverbs says is the beginning of wisdom (9:10).
- ❖ So the foolishness we're dealing with is *not* an issue of the intellect – but of the heart. Now the word for fool in Proverbs 12:15 is actually a less common Hebrew word (*ewil*), which in many ways is synonymous with the more common term, but based on how it's used in Scripture, this word carries a much darker connotation. **The foolishness of this individual is not just ignorant of the things of God – but makes a mockery of them.**
 - Proverbs 14:9, *“Fools (same word) mock at the guilt offering.”* They make a mockery of sin. They mock those who seek atonement for their sins. They mock those who believe they have wronged God and want to be made right with him.
- ❖ And it's because they don't believe those things. **Fools don't believe they're wrong or that they've wronged God.** They don't acknowledge their guilt or their need to be made right with God. Why? Because fools are right in their own eyes.
 - Look back at Proverbs 12:15, *“The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.”* **The reason why the foolish forsake advice is because they're justified in their own eyes.** They think they're right. They can't imagine being wrong on this issue or that area of expertise. And that's at the heart of the problem. It's that **self-justifying mentality** that prevents you from listening to the advice of others.

- ❖ Now I'm sure we've all been there. We've all played the fool. Whether we spurned the advice of our parents or of a coach or colleague or friend – **we rejected what they had to say because ultimately we thought we were more in the right.** That our way of doing things was more justified – more right – than theirs.
 - And now looking back, hopefully we can see how rude we were; how unkind our attitude was; how hateful even. **But what Proverbs teaches is that when you forsake advice, the person you're ultimately hurting is yourself.** You're not just being rude or unkind to those trying to help – you're being rude and unkind to yourself. You're hating yourself.

- ❖ We see this in our text, in Proverbs 15:32, "*Whoever ignores instruction despises himself, but he who listens to reproof gains intelligence.*" **We're simply despising ourselves when we ignore instruction.** We're doing ourselves a disservice – leaving ourselves in a position where it's difficult to grow. It's hard to improve when you're rejecting outside advice. **You'll find yourself in an echo chamber of counsel** – where you end up doing the same things, repeating the same mistakes, and remaining in the same place.

- ❖ But look at the wise. The wise listen to reproof, and they gain intelligence (understanding). They're willing to hear hard things. **When they ask for feedback, they're not just fishing for compliments. They want to hear honest opinions – even if it stings.** It's because they don't automatically assume their way is right. They acknowledge they could be wrong, or there could be a better way. And because of that attitude, the wise are able to grow – to gain a better understanding of themselves and of the pursuit they're on.

- ❖ So, the application of this text is to seek advice. To open yourself up to outside counsel. To ask for critical feedback and correction. **And the key is to seek out *many* advisors – and not just a few whom you know will simply confirm your own biases.**
 - Listen to **Proverbs 11:14**, "*Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.*" There is wisdom to be found in an abundance of advisors from a broad set of viewpoints. **Don't just turn to a couple of friends that you already know will agree with you.**

- ❖ That was the foolishness exhibited by Solomon's son. **He wrote Proverbs for his son, and sadly, Rehoboam forsook his father's advice once he ascended the throne.** In 1 Kings 12, we read about one of the first decisions young Rehoboam had to make. It was a request to lighten and loosen the strictness of servitude within the kingdom.
 - And the old men who served his father, advised him to lighten the load and win the hearts of the people. But we read in **1 Kings 12:8**, "*But he abandoned the counsel that the old men gave him and took counsel with the young men who had grown up with him and stood before him.*" His buddies told him to double down and be even stricter than his father. He should squash any thought of rebellion. But that was bad advice and contributed directly to the split of Israel into two kingdoms.

- ❖ Now, Rehoboam could argue, “But I listened to advice. I took counsel from others. Isn’t that what the wise do?” **Well, that’s why it’s important to add that the wise listen to advice from *many* counselors – from a broad, diverse swath of perspectives.**
- ❖ **Practically speaking, that means reading broadly.** Wisdom calls for reading broadly from newspapers, journals, or books that are rooted in different political ideologies or worldview perspectives. Read the New York Times *and* the Wall Street Journal. Watch Fox News *and* CNN. Read your favorite Christian authors but also those who differ on secondary issues.
 - When was the last time you read an article or book or listened to a message – that you knew, going into it, you’d probably disagree with the author or teacher – but you’re doing it to broaden your perspective and possibly learn something new?
 - **The way of the foolish is right in their own eyes – which is why they feel no need to seek differing opinions or alternative ideas – but the wise listen to advice coming from many counselors and differing viewpoints.**

The Wise Who Receive Reproof

- ❖ That’s the first lesson, and we learn it from the foolish. Now, let’s turn to the wise. Here’s our second lesson: **The wise who receive reproof will enrich their lives.** So while ignoring critical feedback is a form of self-harm (doing yourself a disservice) – taking criticism is a way to help yourself. It serves your good. It enriches your life.
 - Look at Proverbs 15:31, “*The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise.*” Reproof can be life-giving. Being corrected can build you up. But, I know, for many that sounds strange. We associate being corrected with being torn down – not being built up. Words of reproof are seen as words intended to hurt – not to help.
- ❖ **And I think it’s fair to say that we should discern the kind of criticism we’re getting.** The reality is that some criticism, coming from bad actors, is simply intended to hurt you. And, yes, some of that criticism you get is unwarranted. It’s not rooted in reality. Let’s not be naive and assume all forms of correction or criticism is of equal value.
- ❖ But the wise won’t make that judgment prematurely. They won’t jump to that conclusion. **Instead, the wise will assume that there’s at least some nugget of truth in that criticism. There’s has got to be something of value to take away.**
 - That reminds me of when I read about a man who found seven gold bars in the Seoul International Airport, wrapped in newspaper, worth \$325 million. Investigators believe it belonged to smugglers who ditched the bars before being caught by customs. And the man who found the gold – he was a janitor cleaning out a trash bin.
- ❖ I think wisdom calls for us to keep that image in mind. **Even if the feedback you’re getting sounds initially like garbage – just remember, there could be a bar of gold within that trash.** Or maybe it’s just a nugget. But regardless, the wise won’t jump to defend themselves or resort to self-justifying. The wise will listen to criticism, and even if they don’t agree, they’ll mine through what it spoken, sifting it for a nugget of truth.

- ❖ **Friends, you may not realize it at the moment, but that correction coming from your parents; or your spouse; or your boss; or your friend – that correction could be life-giving.** It could truly enrich and enhance your life.
 - And if those relationships are founded on mutual love and respect, then you can safely assume that's their intent. **They're giving you a word of correction because they care about you.** Sure, it's criticism, but it's the kind that gives you life. It's for your good, for your growth.

- ❖ **It really comes down to the question of whether you want to grow.** Do you believe you need improvement – in whatever life pursuit you have in mind? Do you want to see growth? Proverbs is teaching us that the wise are those who are constantly growing and improving – and it's because they're willing to solicit feedback; to accept criticism; to admit mistakes; and to make the necessary changes. That's how you grow.

- ❖ But it's easier said than done. It's hard to receive reproof. Now, it's not like we never take advice or receive any correction. When my doctor reproves me for not exercising enough, I take it without arguing or making excuses. I know she's right. We're generally open to reproof coming from those we respect or recognize to have a expertise that we don't have. And especially if we're going to them for consultation.
 - **But we have a hard time when the criticism is unsolicited, or when it pertains to matters in which we feel competent.** Parents receiving unsolicited parenting advice. Physicians reading online reviews from their patients. Students or employees having to give peer-evaluation. Preachers receiving feedback from the congregation.
 - It's tough to hear it. But it can be so good for you – for your growth as a parent, as a spouse, as a professional or student, as a pastor, or just as a Christian. **Receiving godly correction is one of the God-ordained means of sanctification – of refining our character into Christlikeness.** It comes through the reproof and correction of fellow believers. As iron sharpens iron.

- ❖ **I think one of the most helpful pieces of advice I've received from a seasoned pastor was to create feedback loops within your ministry.** The goal is to create a culture in your church, from the top down, where criticism is invited. It needs to be intentional, and leaders need to invite correction – to solicit feedback – otherwise those who actually have life-giving reproof to share, don't feel comfortable giving it.
 - And then the other helpful piece of advice I received was that – before you institute those feedback loops – **you've got to pray for thick-skin and a soft-heart.** Because our tendency is to grow thin-skinned and hard-hearted. Thin-skinned people are easily bruised by the slightest reproof. And their hearts grow hard and resentful towards those who offer correction.
 - But the wise have thick-skin that can handle the sharpest criticism, and yet their hearts remain tender towards others, welcoming their feedback even if it's initially hard to hear.

- ❖ So, I've tried to take this advice to heart. **At the beginning of this year, we've instituted a post-service review for English service.** Each Sunday night, I gather the English staff and worship deacon and invite key volunteers who were involved that morning, and we walk through the service, giving each other encouragement but also correction.
 - And it's never easy to hear people tell you that this wasn't as good and that you could've done this or that better. But that kind of reproof can be life-giving – it can enrich your life and ministry. I know I have a ways to go. I'm just getting started. I still have more feedback loops to create within my ministry, within my friendships, and within my family life.

- ❖ Friends, we all have to start somewhere. Where are you going to start? Remember, this idea is not just applicable to ministry. **Creating feedback loops would apply to any aspect or any pursuit in life.** Think about how you can create a feedback loop between you and your spouse, between family members, between teammates or colleagues or a small group of friends. If it's not part of the culture, then be the one to initiate – to invite the correction, to solicit the feedback. And of course, pray in advance for your skin to be thick and your heart to be soft and ready to receive whatever nugget of truth might be there.

- ❖ **I think it's a clear sign of spiritual health if we, as a congregation, developed a culture of biblical correction.** Where we speak truth in love to each other – with the aim to give life, to build each other up and not tear each other down.
 - And I know there's a danger we might become a hyper-critical community where everyone is pointing out each other's flaws. Of course, that's not healthy, and that's not where we want to go. **And that's why it's important to stress that these feedback loops and this habit of giving biblical correction – must be conducted within a larger context of biblical encouragement.**

- ❖ So, when I try to give correction to someone in service review, I've been making it my aim to be clear and thoughtful in my feedback – and that means not saying everything that could be said but to focus on one thing of substance and to clearly explain how it could be improved.
 - And I try to start with the correction – with how it could've better – so that I can end with a word of encouragement. **I want the last thing the person hears to be an encouraging word that identifies the specific ways in which God is working in their life or ministry.**
 - And, to be honest, if I can't think of an encouragement, I'd rather pass on giving the correction. **I don't want correction or reproof to just hang out there in isolation.** It could easily be misinterpreted and fail to give life. It's like how sweet and sour need to go together. Do you really want to eat sour chicken? Sour pork, anyone? Oh, but if it's sweet and sour pork, then that's life-giving. That's good stuff.

The Who Fear God and Not Man

- ❖ So that's advice on how to practically and helpfully give criticism, but the main thrust of our text is about receiving it. And like I said, it's not easy to do. Everything in me wants to avoid correction. I want to ignore reproof. It's either because I'm too proud (I'm right in my own eyes) or I'm too scared (to hear something that's going to bruise my ego). **And usually it's both pride and fear working together to keep me from receiving any life-giving reproof.**
 - So how do I become a wiser person who's more willing to take criticism? What needs to happen for me to be the kind of person who regularly solicits feedback and asks for correction? How do I become this person? Here's the last lesson: **Those who fear God and not man will take criticism and receive honor.**

- ❖ This is what we read in Proverbs 15:33, "*The fear of the Lord is instruction in wisdom, and humility comes before honor.*" **Humility, in this context, refers to the humility to take criticism and receive reproof.** And it's the first step on the path to honor. If you want that honor in the end; that recognition of excellence in whatever life pursuit – then it's going to take a process of growing and improving and learning from your mistakes. And all of that starts with humility – humility comes before honor.

- ❖ That's what the text says, and what it implies is that pride is our big obstacle. **Why do I have such a hard time taking criticism?** It's because I don't have humility, and instead I'm full of pride. I'm too wrapped up in myself and worrying about what others think of me.
 - **The Bible calls that the fear of man – where you both desire man's praise and fear man's opinion.** If you live under the fear of man, then you'll definitely take their compliments – but you'll shy away from their corrections. And if you ever do hear or read their criticism, it will crush you. To live under the fear of man is demoralizing.

- ❖ That's why it says, "*The fear of the Lord is instruction in wisdom.*" **The wise path that ends with honor begins with you abandoning the fear of man and embracing the fear of the Lord.** And to fear God, in this context, means you're really only concerned with what He thinks of you. You don't fear of man's opinion anymore.
 - Do you see how this works? **Those who live under the fear of the Lord are not only humble people – they're the kind of people known for taking criticism well.** You can tell them hard things. And they'll take it. They'll sift out whatever truth is there. And they'll learn from it and apply it.

- ❖ Those who live under the fear of the Lord can handle your tough criticism because they're not swayed by your opinion any more. **Your sharp words of reproof and correction can't bruise their ego. Because their ego has been put to death. Put through the wringer that we call the gospel.**

- ❖ The message of the gospel begins with the fear of the Lord. It begins by proclaiming a holy, righteous, perfect God – before whom I am unworthy. I am nothing but a wretched sinner. All I deserve is his wrath – his just condemnation. That's where it starts.

- ❖ **In the gospel, you'll receive the toughest criticism you'll ever face.** You'll be told that there's nothing you can do to deserve salvation. That you are worse off in your sin than you ever imagined. **The gospel says that you're so wicked that they only way God could ever forgive your sins and be reconciled to you – is for his Son to die a bloody, brutal death on an ugly, wicked cross.** If there was another option, don't you think the Father (who loves the Son) would've taken it? But the crucifixion was the only option because our sins are just that ugly and wicked.
 - If you believe this; if you receive this criticism; if you confess your sinfulness – then the gospel has humbled you. It's slain your pride. It's put to death your ego. **So, now if someone tries to criticize you, you're thinking that they don't know the half of it.** It's like what Spurgeon once said, *“If any man thinks ill of you, do not be angry with him, for you are worse than he thinks you to be.”*

- ❖ That's how the gospel criticizes you. And that alone is a huge help to handle the criticism of others. But that's not all the gospel has to say. In the same way, it criticizes you – the gospel encourages you.
 - It points you back to the cross. **Yes, the cross spoke a sharp word of criticism against you – but it also speaks a loving word of encouragement.** It says: This is how much God loves you. That he sent his One and Only Son to die on the cross in your place. So that if you accept, by faith, both his criticism and his encouragement – you are fully forgiven, fully loved, fully accepted by God.

- ❖ **And now the next time someone has some criticism to share or a word of correction for you – now that you're living *in* the gospel and *under* the fear of the Lord – you can handle whatever they throw at you.** You're no longer beholden to their opinion.
 - And it's because you fear the God of the gospel. **You already know what he thinks about you because of that bloody yet beautiful cross.** So take that criticism and take that reproof – and receive that honor that only God can bestow.