

THE CHALLENGE OF LOVE

by Charles G. Finney

"Thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him"--Leviticus 19:17.

Men are bound to reprove their neighbors for sin, or they become partakers or accessories to their sin. If we really love God, we will feel bound to reprove those who hate and abuse Him and break His commands.

If I love the government of the country, won't I reprove and rebuke a man who abuses or reviles it? If a child loves his parents, won't he reprove a man that abuses his parents?

If a man loves the universe and is motivated by love, he knows that sin is inconsistent with the highest good of the universe. If not counteracted, sin injures and ruins, and its direct tendency is to overthrow the order and destroy the happiness of the universe. Therefore, if a Christian sees this happening, his benevolence will lead him to reprove and oppose sin.

LOVE THY NEIGHBOR

Love for the particular people with whom you are connected should lead you to reprove sin. Sin is a reproach to any people, and the man who commits it produces a society harmful to everything good. His example has a tendency to corrupt society, destroy its peace, and introduce disorder and ruin. The duty of everyone who loves the community is to resist and reprove sin.

Love for your neighbor demands it. Neighbor, here, means anybody who sins within the reach of your influence--not only in your presence but in your neighborhood, your nation, or the world. If he sins, he injures himself, and if you love him, you will reprove his sins.

Love for the sinner prompts us to warn him of the consequences of his actions. Suppose we say our neighbor's house on fire. True love would induce us to warn him so he wouldn't perish in the flames. If we see him stay in the burning house, we would plead with him not to destroy himself. Much more should we warn him of the consequences of sin and strive to turn him to God before he destroys himself.

If you see your neighbor sin and neglect to reprove him, it is just as cruel as if you see his house on fire and passed by without warning him. If he was in the house and the house burned, he would lose his life. If he sins, and remains in sin, he will go to hell. Isn't it cruel to let him go unwarned to hell?

Some people seem to consider it not cruel to let a neighbor continue in sin until the wrath of God comes on him. Their feelings are so "tender" that they cannot wound him by telling him of his sin and danger. No doubt, the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel. Instead of warning their neighbor of the consequences of sin, they actually encourage him in it.

For anyone to see rebellion and not lift his hand to oppose it is itself rebellion. It would be counted rebellion by the laws of the land. The man who knows of a treasonable plot and doesn't expose it or try to defeat it is an accessory, condemned by law. If a man sees a rebellion breaking out against God and doesn't oppose it or make efforts to suppress it, he is himself a rebel. God holds us accountable for the death of those whom we allow to continue in sin without reproof, and it is right that He should. If we see them sin, make no opposition, and give no reproof, we consent to it and encourage them in it. If you see a man about to kill his neighbor and do nothing to prevent it, you consent and are an accessory--in the eye of God and in the eye of the law, you are guilty of the same sin.

Likewise, if you see a man committing iniquity and do nothing to resist it, you are guilty with him. His blood will be upon his own head, but at whose hand will God require it? What does God say respecting a watchman? "Son of man, I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore thou shalt hear the word at my mouth, and warn them from me. When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die; if thou dost not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand" (Ezekiel 33:7-8).

This is true of all men. If you allow a neighbor who is within reach of your influence to sin unwarned, he will die in his iniquity, but his blood will be required at your hand.

If you keep silent, your silence encourages him in sin. He infers from your silence that you approve of his sin or, at least, that you don't care about it--especially if he knows you profess Christianity. Silence is consent. Sinners do regard your silence as approval for what they do.

ARROWS OF LIGHT

How many multitudes have been reformed by timely reproof? Most of those who are saved are saved by somebody's rebuking them for sin and urging them to repentance. You may be instrumental in saving any man, if you speak to him, reprove him, and pray for him. A single reproof has often been to the transgressor like the barbed arrow in his soul that festered until its sweet poison drank up his spirits and he submitted to God. I have known instances where even a look of reproof has done the work.

Cases have often occurred where the transgressor has not been reclaimed, but others have been deterred from following his example by the rebukes directed to him. If believers were faithful, men would fear their reproofs, and that fear would deter them from such conduct. Multitudes who now go on unblushing and unawed would pause, think, and be reclaimed and saved! Will you, with such an argument for faithfulness before you, let sinners go on unrebuked until they stumble into hell?

The language in the text is exceedingly strong. "Thou shalt in any wise rebuke him"--that is, without any excuse--"and not suffer sin upon him"--not be accessory to his ruin. The word is a Hebrew superlative, which leaves no doubt or excuse for not doing it. No stronger command of God exists in the Bible than this. God has given it the greatest strength of language that He can.

A man does not live conscientiously toward God or man unless he is in the habit of reproofing transgressors within his influence. This is one reason why there is so little conscience in the Church. This verse from Leviticus is one of the strongest commands in the Bible, yet most Christians don't pay any attention to it. Can they have a clear conscience? They may as well pretend to have a clear conscience and get drunk every day.

No man keeps the law of God or keeps his conscience clear who sees sin and does not reprove it. He who knows of sin and does not reprove it breaks two commandments: first, he becomes an accessory to the transgression of his neighbor; second, he disobeys by refusing to reprove his neighbor.

Would you be prepared to meet your children at the judgment if you had not reproved, chastised, or watched over them? "Certainly not," you would say. But why? "Because God has made it my duty to do this, and He holds me responsible for it." Then take the case of any other man that sins under your eye or within reach of your influence. If he goes down to hell, and you have never reproved him, aren't you responsible? How many souls are now groaning in hell that you have seen commit sin and have never reproved? Now they are pouring curses on your head because you never warned them. How can you meet them on the day of judgment?

How many profess to love God but never even pretend to obey His commands? Are such people prepared to meet God? When He says, "Thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor," He means there is no excuse.

This command is addressed to all men who have neighbors. It was directed to the people of Israel, and through them it is addressed to all who are under the government of God--to high and low, rich and poor, young and old, male and female, and every individual bound to obey His commands.

PRECIOUS PEARLS AND SWINE

He who made the law has a right to make exceptions. Some exceptions to this rule are laid down in the Bible.

God says, "Reprove not a scorner, lest he hate thee" (Proverbs 9:8). If a person is known to be a scorner--a despiser of religion and a hater of God--and has no regard to the Lord's law, why should you reprove him? It will only provoke a quarrel without any good resulting to anybody. Therefore, God makes such a character an exception to the rule.

Jesus Christ says, "Neither cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you" (Matthew 7:6). Whatever else this passage means, it means that sometimes men are in such a state of mind that to talk to them about the Lord would be at once irrational and dangerous, like casting pearls before swine. They have such a contempt for Christianity and such a stupid, sensual, and swinish heart that they will trample all your reproofs under their feet and turn on you in anger. Leave such men alone. Not meddling with them will be greater wisdom than to attack them. But great love and discernment must be used not to suppose those of your neighbors to be swine who do not deserve it and might be helped by reproof.

Jesus said of the scribes and Pharisees, "Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind" (Matthew 15:14). They were full of pride and conceit, satisfied with their own wisdom and goodness, and could not be reached by any reproof. If you begin to reprove them, they will put you down. These men are so full of arguments, cavils, and bullyings that you gain nothing.

When you reprove your neighbor for sin, make him feel that it is not a personal controversy with you or a matter of selfishness on your part. Don't claim any right of superiority over him, but reprove him in the name of the Lord, for the honor of God. If you in any way give the impression that it is a personal controversy, done for any private motive with you, he will invariably rise against you and resist. But if you impress that it is done in the name of God and bring him before God as an offender, he will find it difficult to get away from you without at least confessing that he is wrong.

Above all things, don't make him think it is a little thing that you hint to him. Instead, make him realize he has sinned against God and that it ought to be looked on as a terrible offense. However, you should use more or less severity according to the nature of the case and the circumstances under which the sin was committed.

USING WISDOM IN REPROOF

Your relationship to the person who is guilty of sin should be properly regarded. If a child is going to reprove a parent, he should do it in a manner suited to the relationship. If a man is going to reprove a magistrate or an elder, the apostle says it must be in that way--"treat him as a father" (1 Timothy 5:1).

Relationship should enter deeply into the manner of administering reproof. Parents, children, husbands, wives, brothers, and sisters should all be regarded. The ages of the parties and their relative circumstances in life must be considered. For servants to reprove their masters in the same manner as their equals is improper.

This direction should never be overlooked or forgotten, for if it is, the good effect of reproof will be lost. But remember that relative circumstances of the parties do not take away the obligation of this duty. You are to reprove sin and are bound to do it in the name of the Lord. Do it not as if you were complaining or finding fault for a personal injury committed against yourself but as a sin against God. Thus, when a child reproves a parent, he is not to do it as if he was discussing an injury done to himself but because the parent has sinned against God.

If the individual is ignorant, reproof should be in the form of instruction rather than of severe rebuke. How do you treat your little child? You instruct him and strive to enlighten his mind respecting his duty. You proceed, of course, very differently than you would with a hardened offender.

You would reprove a first offender in a different manner than you would use toward a habitual transgressor. If a person is accustomed to sin and knows it is wrong, you use more severity. The first time a mere mention of it may be enough to prevent a repetition.

If he has not only often committed the sin but been often reprovved, there is necessity for using sharpness. The hardening influence shows that no common rebuke will take hold. He needs to have the terrors of the Lord poured upon him like a storm of hail.

Never show any displeasure at the transgressor that he can possibly turn into personal displeasure at himself. Only show your strong displeasure at what he is doing. Otherwise, he will think you are not in earnest. Suppose you reprove a man for murder in a manner not expressing any abhorrence of his crime. You would not expect to produce any change. The manner should be suited to the nature of the crime; just don't let him think you have any personal feeling. This is the fault in the manner of reprovving crime, both in the pulpit and out of it: for fear of giving offence, men don't express their hatred of the sin. Therefore, transgressors are seldom reclaimed.

You should always have so much of the Holy Spirit with you that when you reprove a man for sin he feels it comes from God. I have known cases where reproof from a Christian cut the transgressor to the heart and stung like the arrow of the Almighty, and he couldn't get rid of it until he repented.

Sometimes reproof is best done by sending a letter, especially if the person is at a distance. And there are times where it can be done even in your own neighborhood.

I knew an individual who chose this way of reprimanding a sea captain for drunkenness. The captain drank hard, especially in bad weather, when his services were very important. He was not only a drunk, but when he drank, he was ill-natured and endangered the lives of all on board. The Christian was concerned and made it a subject of prayer.

This was a difficult case--he did not know how to approach the captain. A sea captain is a perfect despot and has the most absolute power on earth. He sat down, wrote a letter, and handed it to the captain. He plainly and affectionately, but faithfully and pointedly, set forth the sin the captain was committing against God and man. He accompanied it with much prayer to God. The captain read it, and it completely changed his ways. He apologized to the individual and never drank another drop of anything stronger than coffee or tea the whole trip.

It may be very essential to reprove sin in many cases where there is no chance that the individual will be benefited. For example, you must act in cases where your silence would be taken for approval of his sin or where the very fact of his being reprovved may prevent others from falling into the same sin. Where the offender comes properly under the description of a scorner or a swine, there God has made an exception, and you are not bound to reprove. But in other cases, the duty is yours and the consequences are God's.

People ask, "Should I reprove strangers?" Why not? Isn't the stranger your neighbor? You are not to reprove a stranger in the same way that you would a familiar acquaintance, but because he is a stranger is no reason why he should not be reprovved. If a man swears profanely in your presence, his being a stranger does not excuse you from the responsibility of administering reproof or trying to bring him to repentance and save his soul.

PULLING SINNERS FROM THE FIRE

Don't talk about people's sins, go and rebuke them. Christians often talk about people's sins behind their backs, and this is great wickedness. If you want to talk about a person's sins, go and talk to him about them, and try to get him to repent and forsake them. Don't talk to others behind his back and leave him bound for hell.

Few Christians are sufficiently conscientious to practice this duty. Thousands never think of doing it. They live in habitual disobedience to this plain but strongly-expressed command of God. Then they wonder why they don't have the spirit of prayer and why there aren't more revivals! How can they enjoy Christianity? What would the universe think of God if He granted the joys of religion to such unfaithful believers?

People have more regard for their own reputation than to the requirements of God. Rather than run the risk of being called judgmental or of creating enemies by rebuking sin, they let men remain unrebuked. It show they have greater fear of men than of God. For fear of offending men, they run the risk of offending God. They absolutely disobey God in one of His plainest and strongest commandments rather than incur the displeasure of men by rebuking their sins.

No man has a right to say, when we reprove him for his sin, that it's none of our business. Often transgressors tell faithful reprovers they had better mind their won business and not meddle with what doesn't concern them. God forbid that we should be silent. He has commanded us to rebuke our neighbor in any wise regardless of the consequences. And we will rebuke them, though all hell should rise up against us.

If a man professes to love God, he ought to have consistency enough to reprove those that oppose God. If Christians were consistent in this duty, many would be converted by it. A right public sentiment would be formed, and sin would be rebuked and forced to retire before the majesty of Christ. If Christians were not such cowards, absolutely disobedient to the plain command of God, one thing would certainly come of it- either they would be murdered in the streets as martyrs because men could not bear the intolerable presence of truth, or men would be converted.

What should we say, then, to such professing Christians? Are you afraid to reprove sinners? When God commands, are you prepared to obey? How will you answer to God?

Will you practice this duty? Will you reprove sin faithfully and not bear it for your neighbors? Will you make your whole life a testimony against sin? Or will you hold your peace and be weighed down with the guilt of all transgressors around you and within your sphere of influence? God says, "Thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him." Think about it.