

BIBLICAL CONFRONTATION

God calls every believer to promote unity in His Church. Followers of Christ are to exhibit brotherly love, be quick to forgive, and be slow to speak words that do not edify. God's word makes clear that the Holy Spirit draws believers together as one body (the Church) to bear one another's burdens and be the witnesses Jesus desires.

The Great Commission challenge (Matt. 28:18-20) is clear and awesome—and only accomplishable if the body of Christ is unified.

Though the focus of this article is how to confront in brotherly love when there is sin, I want to warn that the enemy can hijack our efforts to follow the Word and *tell him his fault* and use our words to cause division and discouragement in the body of Christ. This demands prayerful consideration of what, when, and how to say what needs to be said.

The devil knows that followers of Jesus can only be strong witnesses for Jesus if they are united and encouraged. Therefore, one must balance Bible verses that direct believers to *rebuke* a person engaging in sin and *tell him his fault* with the directives to *speak in truth and love*, *forgive*, and *restore the person gently*.

Correcting and confronting *is* biblical. When we see a brother sin, Scripture commands us to confront the person engaged in sin, but we must remember the goal is not to rebuke, but to restore.

What Does Biblical Rebuke Mean? Bible Definition and Examples

The word rebuke appears in Scripture more than 100 times (a few examples include Ruth 2:16, Proverbs 27:5–6, Matthew 18:15, Luke 17:3, Galatians 6:1, and Ephesians 5:11). The New Testament Greek word most often used for *rebuke* is *epitimao*—it means to *warn* or *reprove seriously*. The Old Testament Hebrew equivalent is more of a word picture meaning to *shake back and forth*—from which comes the expression, *I want to shake some sense into you*.

The directive is clear. Scripture notes:

- “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault...” (Matt. 18:15)

- “Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful *of sinning*.” (1 Tim. 5:20)
- “If your brother **sins**, rebuke him...” (Luke 17:3)
- Spiritual leaders are to confront sin to protect all the flock.
- Christians are to confront when believers persist in sin.

Scripture commands faithful followers of the Lord Jesus to flee from and call out sin. Though most understand *what* to do, *how to do it* is often a mystery. Now that the *what* is clear, let us move on to the *how*.

Did Our Lord Jesus Rebuke Publicly?

Bible verses such as Matthew 18:2-36 and 1 Timothy 5:20 reveal that the Lord Jesus Christ rebuked publicly, and that Christians are to rebuke publicly as well. However, that is not the first step. Yes, there were times Jesus rebuked with strong words and actions—*he drove out the money changers in the temple with a whip and he called the Pharisees snakes and vipers*, but that was only after multiple attempts to get them to listen, respond to truth, and turn from sin and evil.

Christians are to follow the example of Christ—to speak and act in the same way He did, but special care must be exercised when offering a rebuke, for the enemy is an expert at using well-intended efforts to facilitate division and discouragement in the Church. In this, we must rely heavily on the leading of the Spirit.

Followers of Christ must confront sin and not allow evil to find a foothold in the hearts of believers or in the Church of Jesus Christ. But *how* is this to be done so that at the end of the day, it can be said of us, “*You have gained your brother.*” How can we look into our brother’s eye, tell him his fault, and see them move them away from sin rather than away from the Lord Jesus?

Rebuking is fairly easy. Facilitating restoration, that’s the challenge.

Followers of Jesus

Followers of Jesus are to be *crafty as serpents and gentle as doves*. With help from the Spirit, Christians are to walk by faith (that is, in all things, we are to be led by the Spirit). Believers

should not be driven by fear (so as not to speak out) or by the flesh (such that we say what makes *us* feel better rather than what will help *others* better their spiritual walk).

Believers are God's hands, feet, and voice on Earth. We are living in the latter days, and prophecy promises an increase in evil activity. Scripture notes that in the last days, many will succumb to a stumbling block or pitfall crafted by the devil or be tempted by the enemy not to listen when truth is shared.

In this season of increasing darkness, it is common to hear that a person refuses to listen even when by faith they know the truth. The enemy can facilitate spiritual blindness, and a deaf spirit may try to thwart your attempt to share the Word as a reproof for correction. But just as our heavenly Father warns, rebukes, and corrects, so must the followers of Jesus. Bible verses provide insight into **how** to confront when a brother or sister in the faith falls into sin.

What Is The Purpose of the "Two Or Three Witnesses" Step In A Biblical Rebuke?

In Matthew 18, Scripture advises first confronting the person engaged in sin privately, and only if that person refuses to listen are we to confront with two or three witnesses. The act of engaging several witnesses has Old Testament roots. The testimony of *two or three witnesses* was considered binding in court—their testimony in the confrontation process in New Testament times was so that the accusations of wrongdoing may be established.

Paul advises a gentle rebuke (Galatians 6:1) as a first step in confronting sin. The private approach minimizes undue public shame or embarrassment and supports the goal of harmony and unity in the Church. However, if that person refuses to listen even when Scripture clearly indicates why reproof for correction is necessary, then believers are directed to escalate the matter with several *witnesses*.

When the motive is not pure, it is possible to carefully expose the matter to spiritually mature believers in a way that honors God, encourages repentance and does not constitute gossip. Engaging *witnesses* can make for a more forceful plea for correction.

According to Old Testament tradition, the assessment of *two or three witnesses* confirmed a matter. The thought here, then, is that if a sinner does not listen to you when you tell him his fault, they may listen to a small, spiritually mature group who confirms your assessment.

Judging and Rebuking: The Sermon On The Mount

Jesus' directive in Matthew 7 (part of the Sermon on the Mount) is very clear. The King James text of Matthew 7:1 begins with, "*Judge not...*" Many have difficulty reconciling that directive with Bible verses that state: "*If your brother sins, go and point out their fault*" (Matthew 18:15).

There is no contradiction. The command to *judge not* in the Sermon on the Mount means to not be judgmental. Further, our judgments of one's behavior must be based on the Word of God. We move in the flesh when our spiritual rebuke is used to belittle, embarrass, or punish. But we show concern for all the flock when we rebuke sin and make judgments based on Scripture. Jesus and Paul warned that the sins of one can impact many. The Lord, therefore, directs believers to mirror the heavenly Father in watching for and warning against sins that Satan will craftily use to compromise our witness and spiritual life.

The process of confronting evil begins with prayer. We must pray for the right mindset, and the right heart, that we (and the person we are confronting) will sense the leading of the Spirit and that, in the end, our reproof for correction will be well received. The goal is not to embarrass and crush, but to enlighten and lift. Believers should rejoice when evil is confessed, and repentant sinners commit to walk the path God has set before them.

Scripture notes that *Open Rebuke is Better Than Secret Love*

Solomon wrote that "open rebuke is better than secret love" (Prov. 27:5-6). This means that boldness must trump fear when sins abound and threaten an individual's (or the church's) spiritual life. When a sinner refuses to listen after a private confrontation and a follow-up rebuke with two or three witnesses, a public (open) rebuke is warranted. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul openly confronted one involved in incest in the church—he counseled Timothy to do the same in 1 Timothy 5. Paul directs believers to reprove and disassociate from *such a one* who refuses to acknowledge their fault. Notably, Paul ordered the Corinthian church to accept the excommunicated sinner back into the fellowship after he repented (2 Corinthians 1).

We are to be quick to forgive, to extend God's grace and mercy, to lean heavily on the Word for direction, and to first check the "log" in our own eye before confronting others for the speck in theirs.

Believers are to lead with love, gently acknowledge fault, listen for explanations that could account for your misinterpreting a situation, reproof for correction (not out of any other

motivation), and always remember what Paul wrote to the Galatian church: “If anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him *in a spirit of gentleness*. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.”

Is open rebuke biblical? Yes, but almost always as a last resort, when the person refuses to listen, rejects godly counsel, and by their actions encourages others to be tempted and enter into sin. And remember, the last step is not *rebuking* but *restoring*.

A Few Things to Keep in Mind When Confronting

A simple four-step guide for confronting evil follows:

Step one: *With the right heart*

- In love (John 13:34)
- With sincerity (1 John 3:18)
- In confidence (Prov. 11:13)
- With an emphasis on mercy (Matt. 5:7)
- With gentleness (Gal. 6:1)
- Without a ‘log in your own eye’ (Matt. 7:3-5)
- With due respect (1 Peter 2:17)
- With discretion (Matt. 18:15b)

Step two: *With the right goals*

- Restoration (Gal. 6:1-5; Eph. 4:29).
- Be committed to forgetting the past, mending the present, and safeguarding the future (Prov. 17:9; 19:11).
- With the goal of bringing out the best in each other (Heb. 10:24).

Step three: *With the right words*

- With forethought (Prov. 16:23a).
- With guarded words (Prov. 13:3).
- With an understanding that small errors can have big consequences (Prov. 18:20).

Step four: *At the right time*

- Remember, there is a correlation between speaking at the best time and getting the best response (Ecc. 3:7).
- Compliment in public, critique in private (Prov. 16:23).