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CORRECT BUT DON'T JUDGE!

Today's Text: Ezekiel Chap. 3

Extracts:

Now it came to pass at the end of seven days that the word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Son of man, *I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; ... When I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life, that same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand. Yet, if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul*" [Ezek. 3: 16-19]

Tara Conner was the reigning Miss USA, a competition organized annually by Donald Trump's Miss Universe Organization.¹ In December 2006, she was on the verge of being stripped of her crown following press reports of her involvement in underage drinking. However, in a highly publicized press conference, she was allowed to keep her crown, following her acceptance of Trump's advice to go into a rehab facility and to submit herself for regular drug tests. The following day, Rosie O'Donnell, a co-presenter of ABC TV's morning chit-chat program for women, "The View," lashed out at Trump whom she claimed did not qualify to be a moral authority for America's twenty-year-olds on account of his multiple divorces and marriages.

We may not know Trump's motive for giving Tara a second chance. Was it to correct (i.e., to point out her misconduct so as to make amends) or to judge her (i.e., pass a final sentence on her misconduct)? Tara was grateful for the chance to rehabilitate herself. However, for Rosie, the beauty pageant organizer was acting as a judge of Tara's character.

Where do we draw the line between correcting and judging? Where does correcting end and judging begin? Who gives us the right to correct others? Do you have to be a moral authority to correct others? What do you benefit anyway from correcting others? We shall take up those questions and more in today's lesson, using God's commission to Ezekiel as our guide.

¹ Based on Access Hollywood, "Trump to Rosie O'Donnell: You're sued!" <http://pn poc.msnbc.com/id/16304661>, Dec. 21, 2006

1. Can you honestly mind your own business?

You may recall the story of two angels that the Lord had sent to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah on account of the wickedness of the people there. They arrived one evening in the form of handsome young men, and were being hosted by Lot, Abraham's nephew. At bed time, "the men of Sodom, both old and young ... surrounded the house," and called out to Lot, saying, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that *we may know them carnally*." Lot begged them not "to do so wickedly," offering instead that they could have his virgin daughters if they had to sleep with somebody that night. In fury, they responded, "This one came in to stay here, and *he keeps acting as a judge*; now we will deal worse with you than with them." As they surged forward, the angels blinded the attackers [Gen. 19: 1-11]. In your opinion, was Lot judging or correcting the wicked people?

Ordinarily, most people would prefer to mind their own business. Whether others are doing the right thing or not is not their responsibility or concern. Why would you invite hostility to yourself by pointing out people's faults to them? Are we not even worse than they are? Of course, nobody is an island. When God asked Cain about his brother, Abel, he replied, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" [Gen. 4: 9]. If he was not his brother's keeper, how did he know where to find him to kill? Therefore, each of us is in the centre of the world, so to speak. As we look up to those ahead of us and compete with those at the same level with us, there are also others behind us who use us as their standards or role models. Therefore, whether we like it or not, correcting others is our business! The problem is how to draw the boundary between correcting and judging.

To correct is to draw people's attention to their errors and, in most cases, suggest how to rectify them. The techniques applied could range from gentle nudges to disciplinary measures, such as temporary loss of privileges. In fact, encouraging desirable conduct with, for example, praise and rewards/recognition is an integral part of correcting. However, when the offending party refuses correction but chooses to remain in error, what should we do? That is the key question that we shall examine in today's study.

2. Why we correct others

From God's perspective, any human conduct that contradicts His word is a misconduct or sin. Therefore, whether we like it or not, correcting others is our business for the following reasons, among others:

a) *It is a God-given duty*

We may be parents or older siblings, mentors, counselors or supervisors or role models. In each of those positions, the younger ones are looking up to us for guidance. We have the responsibility to raise them God's way. In

the word of God, “a child left to himself brings shame to his mother” [Prov. 29: 15]. Therefore, even when we live alone, we cannot close our eyes to misconduct by others because whatsoever we do to the least of God’s children (including correcting them), we do it to Him [Matt. 25: 40].

In prophet Ezekiel’s case, God specifically commanded him, saying, “Son of man, go to the house of Israel and *speak with My words to them*” [Ezek. 3: 4]. Could he have refused that duty? We know what happened to another prophet, Jonah, when he tried to run away from doing God’s duty to correct the people of Nineveh. Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of a fish [Jon. 1: 17]!

b) *It is a show of love*

The word of God says, “He who spares his rod hates his son but he who loves him disciplines him promptly” [Prov. 13: 24]. Correction may be an integral part of training up a child so that s(he) will know what to do when s(he) grows up [Prov. 22: 6]. It may be an essential part of professional development or job training. Therefore, correction may inflict necessary pain now that will pay off in due course.

We do come across instances of people who claim to love others by shielding them away from pain and correction. Some parents give their children whatever they ask for and cannot stand to see them suffer. Some parents will do anything, fair or foul, to make their children get ahead in life. For example, one mother introduced her only daughter to birth control (but not abstinence), when she attained the age of eleven, and encouraged her to get “sexual experience” before getting married! Along the way, she got pregnant and dropped out of high school. A father taught his son early how to use hand guns. Soon enough, he carried his father’s gun to school and shot one of his school mates for teasing him. Years down the road of time, wards do recognize their parents’ true love when they denied them comforts and insisted on hard work and diligence. Students come to respect their strict teachers who gave them much home work and punished every rule break. So, to show love does not mean telling people what they want to hear but showing them the truth of God.

c) *It is a sin not to correct others!*

The word of God says, “to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin” [Jam. 4: 17]. For example, God specifically told Ezekiel that if he refused to warn the wicked or backslidden to repent and if such persons died in their sins, He would put their blood on the prophet’s head [Ezek. 3: 18, 20]. Therefore, God will hold us vicariously liable if we refuse to correct those that we are in the position to correct.

3. Guiding principles for correcting others

If correcting others is so important for our own salvation, how do we know what to do and do it well? From the third chapter of the book of Ezekiel, we can note the following principles:

a) *You must have the authority*

God was sending Ezekiel to a people who were “impudent and hard-hearted” who would hardly listen to Him, not to talk of mere mortals [vv. 7,8]. So, He fed him the word of God on a scroll, thus arming the prophet to feed them the Lord’s word [vv. 1-4]. God made Ezekiel’s face and forehead “like adamant stone, harder than flint” so that he would not be afraid of them nor be dismayed by their rebellious looks [v.9]. In short, Ezekiel was endowed with the spiritual authority to play the role of a watchman over the people [v. 17].

Moral authority is thus essential for those who aspire to be able to *successfully* correct others because our fruits speak more eloquently about our credibility than our actions [Matt. 7: 15-23]. We may be the only epistles of Christ that people we come across may ever read [2 Cor. 3: 1-4]. All Scripture is profitable, among other uses, “for reproof, for *correction* (and) for instruction in righteousness” [2 Tim. 3: 16]. Therefore, correcting others is not for hypocrites!

b) *Your duty is to warn, not to judge!*

Ezekiel’s duty was merely to warn the wicked to repent and desist from error [Ezek. 3: 18, 19], and for the righteous to resist backsliding [vv. 20, 21]. God added, “He who hears, let him hear; and he who refuses, let him refuse” [v. 27]. In other words, *we can only correct people in error but we must leave them to make the choice to obey or not to do so.*

Sometimes, the duty may go beyond merely pointing out misconduct to include encouraging or insisting on the desired change. For example, writing to the Church in Corinth on the subject of grievous sins among its members, Paul said [1 Cor. 5: 9-13]:

I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of this world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner-not even to eat with

such a person. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore, put away from yourselves the evil person.

Such action against erring members is like suspending members of a club or association when they breach the rules and regulations, such as non-payment of dues or professional misconduct, or getting failing students to repeat some courses or redo some assignments. They can be re-admitted or restored if and when they make amends.

c) *Leave God to judge!*

God told Ezekiel that those who listened to correction and repented would live [Ezek. 3: 21] but those who persisted in sin would surely die [vv. 19, 20]. In other words, only God has the power to judge sinners. Human beings are not capable of judging others because we are all equally guilty “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” [Rom. 3: 23]. On the other hand, God is truth and His judgment is based on *absolute truth*, unlike human standards which are relative [Rom. 2: 1-2]. In addition, God is not a respecter of persons and He judges each one “according to his deeds” [vv. 6, 11]. Human beings, on the other hand, may look at the colour, creed or class of the accused to judge them [1 Sam. 16: 7].

What are the implications of the forgoing? The following key points should be noted:

- *An accuser cannot play judge at the same time.* That is why the police can arrest and prosecute suspects but cannot jail them. If you correct people and they refuse, leave them to God for judgment. In some cases, God hands such people over to state authorities that He has given authority to judge [Rom. 13: 1]. Therefore, a judge that is empowered by the state “is God’s minister, *an avenger to execute wrath on him who practises evil*” [v. 4]. Unfortunately, this privilege is often abused by government agencies to oppress the poor or opposition, especially in developing and socialist countries.
- *When an accuser assumes the role of judge at the same time, we may have persecution on our hands.* For example, in 1989, the Iranian revolutionary leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, pronounced a death sentence on a British novelist, Salman Rushdie, for writing *Satanic Verses* that the Moslem world considered blasphemous of Muhammad. During the Medieval Age, the Church persecuted or killed believers that the Church leaders judged to be using “sorcery” to perform miracles! Therefore, when some people take it upon themselves to burn abortion clinics or kill homosexuals, they are criminals, not crusaders! Again, that confirms that human beings are not fit to be judges of human conduct.

- Happily, *God has granted the power to judge the world to His Son, Jesus Christ [Jn 5: 25-29]*. For that purpose, He will soon return as King and Judge [*Matt. 24: 29-31; 25: 33-46*]. Those who believe in Him will have everlasting life but those who do not are “condemned already” [*Jn 3: 16, 17*].

4. Conclusion: to save, not to shave!

In this study, we have learned that God has given us the duty to correct others when they err from His truth. That may take such forms as encouraging desirable conduct, or chastising or penalizing breaches, while insisting on minimum or expected standards. *Our motive should be to save our erring brothers and sisters and bring them back to the Lord*. It is hardly to shave their heads in the public, so to speak! We are correcting them out of love. Therefore, we need to empathise with them so as to preserve their self-respect. If they hear you and amend their ways, they will be saved. However, if they refuse, you have saved yourself from God’s wrath.

Let us learn a lesson from the way Jesus handled the case of the woman caught in adultery [*Jn 8: 1-11*]. Her accusers based their authority to stone her to death on the Law of Moses. But, according to that law, “he who commits adultery with his neighbour’s wife, *the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death*” [*Lev. 20: 10*]. We are not told what the crowd had done to the woman’s accomplice. If they had spared the man, that would have been a case of partiality in human judgment. When Jesus asked those without sin to cast the first stone, all of the accusers disappeared because they knew in their hearts that they were equally guilty. That again confirms that accusers should not play judge at the same time, since they are not any better. Did Jesus empathise with the woman while correcting her? Of course! First of all, He called the men who had pursued her “accusers” [*v. 10*]. Then He asked her if anyone had been able to condemn her. She answered, “No one, Lord.” Then, Jesus replied, “Neither do I condemn you; *go and sin no more*” [*v. 11*]. I believe that that woman took the correction to heart from that moment and became a changed person for the rest of her life.

Go and do likewise!