

BE HUMBLER TO BE WISE

SERIES: CHOOSE WISELY



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Proverbs 15:31–33
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Proverbs 15:31–33

I come from a long line of stubborn. Now, stubbornness can be a helpful trait—stubborn people will hang in there when things get tough; they're fighters; they can endure longer than most because they just don't want to be defeated. However, stubbornness can also be a challenging trait. If you are too stubborn, you may find that you have trouble keeping friends or building relationships with depth.

Coming from a long line of stubborn, I inherited the trait. I remember a day when my stubbornness reared its ugly head. I was in my 20s, in college but living with my parents for the summer. Mom and I were arguing about some detail in a story. She was sure she was right about the detail. I was sure I was right. So we argued back and forth for quite a while. Instead of giving up because the factoid just didn't matter, we dug in, and the tension grew.

We had an errand to run, but instead of shelving our stupid argument, we took our argument to the car. I remember, just as mom was exiting the driveway, she said to me, "You know Corrie, your stubbornness can be a very unattractive quality. You need to learn to give in and admit when you are wrong."

When she said that, there was a burn in my gut. But do you know what I was thinking? Not, "She's right, my stubbornness is inappropriate and gets out of hand. I really need to apologize and try to become a better person." No! I thought, "Ugh! Right back at you Mom!" I wanted to remind her of Jesus' words, and tell her to remove the log in her own eye instead of making such a comment about the tiny little speck in my own! I had a hundred comebacks to fire at her, but I just swallowed them and said nothing. But believe me, there was a whole lot of hot inner-dialogue going on. I just didn't express my stubborn self-righteousness out loud.

Amazing that my mom's words have stuck with me all these years, but I can't remember what we were arguing over! How many of you can recall similar stories

from your own life? How many of you got the stubborn gene? Does your stubbornness ever cause problems in your relationships?

We live in a very permissive culture. We can spout off strongly-held opinions in public. We can debate without conceding our position and our debates can get heated, disrespectful, and even cross the line into hurtful, but there are few consequences. But as Christians, we stubborn ones have a problem. As followers of Jesus, we have a different set of expectations. In case you didn't know, stubbornness is not found among the fruit of the Spirit! We are expected to be the *opposite* of stubborn, to be humble. Our character and actions are to reflect the humility of our Savior, Jesus. That's a good thing, but it's challenging to achieve if you are naturally stubborn.

Stubbornness and humility often go by different names in the church. For stubbornness we use language like "hard-hearted", and for humility we often use words like "teachable," "receptive to feedback," "moldable," and "soft-hearted." Whatever language we use, we agree that Christians should be humble. What often remains unclear is how to get there.

When people talk about humility, it's talked about like it can be achieved by simply changing our attitude. As though we can just decide one day to be humble, and then our words and actions will just fall in line instantly. It seems rare that the church talks about a process that leads toward humility. We don't speak much about tools or strategies that might help us become humble. The book of Proverbs can help us.

The words humility and humble only appear five times in the book, but so many of the proverbs get at the trait of humility. If Proverbs is a map to wisdom, then it also teaches us that becoming humble is an essential leg on that journey. Solomon taught this over and over, in many different ways, that we must be humbled to be wise.

Today we are going to set Proverbs 15:31-33 as our home base. This small passage, and other related proverbs, have practical wisdom for us about the journey

toward humility. I hope these proverbs might help us with our stubbornness problem so we can become more Christ-like.

Proverbs 15:31-33:

The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise. 32 Whoever ignores instruction despises himself, but he who listens to reproof gains intelligence. 33 The fear of the Lord is instruction in wisdom, and humility comes before honor.

No one said that these three verses are a unit. They aren't offset in the text or anything, I just see them as interrelated. And I think the final line, "humility comes before honor" is the overarching idea of all three verses. As I've studied these proverbs and others, I've observed three practices that lead to humility. Let's take them one practice at a time, starting with verse 31.

I chose the title of this sermon carefully. As verse 31 indicates, the way toward humility is not always of your choosing. Sometimes the things that make us humble are in the hands of other people. Look at this line, "the ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise." Zero-in on the word "reproof." Reproof can also be translated "correction" or "rebuke," so I'll use those words interchangeably.

There are many examples of reproof or rebuke in the Bible. Generally, it's when one person confronts another. They confront wrongdoing or sin. The hope or goal of rebuke is to *correct* sin, to lead a child of God to confession and repentance so that they can choose wisely in the future.

Rebuke is often done directly, in-person, with blunt speech. Sometimes a rebuke is harsh. Remember the time Peter tried to rebuke Jesus? Jesus had told his disciples that he would have to suffer, be rejected, and killed. Peter couldn't stand hearing these words and rebuked Jesus. After Peter's rebuke, Jesus issues one of his own, with these words, "Get behind me Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."¹

How do you think Peter felt when Jesus rebuked him in like this? I imagine he felt a burn greater than when my mom called me on my stubbornness. We don't know how Peter responded in the moment because that part of the story isn't recorded, but he's still with Jesus and

the other disciples a few chapters later. We assume Peter was appropriately repentant and that he and Jesus talked it out somehow and moved on.

Rebuke isn't always harsh or direct. Sometimes *indirect*, *gentle* words are just as effective. You likely know the story of King David – how he coerced a young married woman named Bathsheba into his home, forced her into sex, and got her pregnant. To cover up his sin, David manipulated circumstances so that Bathsheba's husband was killed in battle, and then he quickly married Bathsheba so he could claim the child was legitimately conceived.

That's a well-known story, but we often forget the rebuke David received. The prophet Nathan went to David and rebuked him for these sins. But Nathan didn't rebuke him directly or harshly. Instead, Nathan tells David a story. The story is about two men, one rich and powerful and the other poor and lowly. The rich man does a great injustice against the poor man. As David listens to Nathan's story, he becomes very angry at the sin of the rich man and speaks judgment against him. At this point, Nathan simply says, "You are the man!"

Nathan had more to say than that, but David responded to Nathan's rebuke positively. He confessed and repented. In 2 Samuel 12:13 David says, "I have sinned against the Lord." Psalm 51 is David's prayer of confession for these sins and it starts with these words, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!"²

David did not make excuses or justifications or give the rationale behind his actions. When rebuked, he simply said, "I did it." And then he goes before the Lord in repentance. David is a great example for us. He failed in every way possible. His heart was hard. He was blind to his own sin. He seemed beyond redemption. But Nathan's rebuke was the effective tool to crack open that hard heart, to peel off David's blinders, and lead him to repentance.

We are all like David. We sin willfully, sometimes in BIG ways. We are really good at justifying our sin and living like it never happened. Like David, we are often stubborn, arrogant, and wrong, and to live humbly before God, we need someone to step up and tell us so! David exemplified the teaching of Proverbs 15:31. He listened to Nathan's rebuke and repented. Here is humility practice 1: we need to welcome correction.

If we are stubborn—we always think we are right and our actions are always justified—how can we become wise? No one is born wise. Like David, we are all fallible sinners. We all need “Nathans.” We need righteous people in our lives who have the courage to rebuke us. *And*, we can follow David’s example—let a rebuke sink in, let it penetrate our justifications, and simply say, “I did that.”

I won’t pretend that welcoming correction is easy. I think it’s incredibly difficult to concede wrong thinking or wrongdoing. Sometimes it’s hard to see when we’ve crossed over the line into sin because we are so sure we are right. That’s why we need rebuke in our lives.

Proverbs 15:31 is difficult wisdom because rebuke stings. Correction is uncomfortable. It exposes us as fools when we want to be known as good people. It’s hard to admit that we are wrong, sinful, and that we need to change. But there can be so much growth when we do!

Notice that 15:31 calls it “life-giving” rebuke! There are a number of proverbs that tell us that when we ignore rebuke, it leads to bad things like poverty, disgrace, and leading other astray.³ On the other hand, the proverbs teach us that heeding rebuke leads to life, greater intimacy with God, and honor.⁴ When you’ve lost your way, rebuke is like a friend showing up and giving you a compass so you can find the path again.

Whatever the form and tone, when done righteously and out of love, rebuke is a form of healthy discipline.⁵ The book of Proverbs makes it clear that rebuke is one of the most effective tools we have to help people change and grow in humility and wisdom. As Proverbs 17:10 says, “a rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool.” So the questions I want each of us to reflect on today are these: Who is my Nathan? Do I make room in my life, my heart, my ego, for a Nathan to speak godly rebuke? If not, what changes might I need to make?

It’s time for a Proverbs pop quiz. I’d like you to fill-in-the-blanks to end this proverb. If you know the answer, keep it to yourself: “The sweetness of a friend comes from his adjective + noun.” Don’t worry about guessing the true answer; just think of what comes immediately to your mind.

For the past two weeks I’ve been asking people to answer this. I put this proverb up on the PBC Facebook page and my own Facebook page, and here are some of

the responses I got. First, there was food theme – there was: delicious BBQ, dark chocolate, and from my brother Brock, omelet skills, or wine selection. My 12-year-old nephew Clayton said, great personality. Other answers were: shared laughter, willing presence, genuine concern, loving embrace, and patient listening. There was a heart theme—unselfish heart, honest heart, genuine heart, kind heart, and gentle heart. And there was a support theme—faithful support, unconditional support, or unwavering support.

Here is what Proverbs 27:9 actually says, “Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his *earnest counsel*.” How many of you are surprised that *earnest counsel* is the answer?

I think most of us value our friends because they love us. They make us feel good. We have fun with them. But friendship has much richer gifts to offer than these. We can take friendship to another level if we make space for our friends to act as counselors in our lives.

Let’s turn back to Proverbs 15 and look at verse 32. It says, “Whoever ignores instruction despises himself, but he who listens to reproof gains intelligence.” Since the proverbs are written in poetic verse, the words *instruction* and *reproof* are not the same thing, but they are linked and have overlapping meaning. I’ve studied both words throughout Proverbs and here’s what I’ve observed. Both reproof and instruction carry a sense of *correction*. Reproof corrects negative thoughts or actions. Instruction corrects ignorance, with a focus on learning or growth. Proverbs 15:32 tells us that welcoming instruction is practice toward humility.

You cannot always be your own teacher. You won’t always know the way to go, what is best, or how to act wisely in every situation. We all need instruction in our lives. We need people who have more wisdom than we do and are willing to share it with us. It makes sense that welcoming instruction from others will make us wiser in the long run. *And* it makes sense that we will be far more receptive to instruction if it comes from someone we know, respect, and trust.

The proverbs indicate that we should welcome instruction from various parties, including our mother and father or a friend, but they most often use the language of advisor or counselor. Proverbs stresses that welcoming instruction means consulting someone wise. Let’s consider the example of Moses; he lived this wisdom.

The Bible called Moses “the meekest man on the face of the earth.”⁶ Meek can also be translated “humble.” We see his humility in action in Exodus 18. There, Moses is reunited with his father-in-law Jethro after a long separation. Jethro watches Moses judge the disputes among the people of Israel and sees him instruct them in the law. Moses is busy from dawn till dusk. Jethro is concerned about Moses’ work habits, so he goes to Moses and says, “What you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone.”⁷

Jethro then gives Moses some very sensible advice—to appoint chiefs or judges over each tribe, and over groups within the tribes. This shared burden would be more efficient, and allow both Moses and the people to thrive. Moses did what his father-in-law suggested and everyone benefitted. Moses found relief from his workaholicism, and the people were better and more efficiently served. Because of its success, this tradition of delegated leadership was then passed on through the generations.

Take a few steps back and appreciate the significance of this example. Moses was the God’s chosen and anointed leader over all Israel. Moses had a very personal and intimate relationship with God. He regularly spent time in God’s presence, and yet he didn’t always know what was best. He knew that sometimes God chooses to speak to us indirectly, through others. Moses welcomed and trusted instruction from his father-in-law, a man who was not even a worshipper of Yahweh!

This is impressive to me. If I were Moses, I’d probably trust in the fact that I was God’s chosen one. Surely if God hadn’t given me explicit instructions, then I must have enough wisdom within me to discern how to move forward! Are you like me?

Think of a struggle or challenge you are currently facing. What’s your strategy to work it out? Is your strategy to work harder and longer? Are you trying to figure things out by yourself? I’m sure many of us pray and seek God’s wisdom when we’re struggling, but there’s another God-given strategy available to us. We can seek and welcome the instruction of another, knowing they may have critical wisdom to offer us.

Our culture says, “I can go it alone. I’m all I need.” Proverbs says, “Go to a counselor. Seek instruction and you will find the way to life.”⁸

I’ve seen this kind of humility in action. The four years immediately after grad school, I worked at Messiah College in Pennsylvania. Messiah is a private, Christian college and they compete athletically in the NCAA division III, which means no athletic scholarships. Messiah’s men’s soccer program is the most decorated program in the country in any division. The Falcons have gone to 28 national tournaments and won 11 championships.

The team’s motto is “As iron sharpens iron.” Those words are taken directly from Proverbs 27:17 which says, “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.” The Messiah team lives this proverb intentionally. Yes, they use the motto to challenge each other to excel athletically. But they also use their motto as a free pass to challenge and encourage one another to be better people, better disciples of Jesus. I knew many of the players personally. I saw them hold each other accountable. Some of them even sought my counsel. Most of them cared more about their character development than their number of national championships.

It’s pretty easy to see how snubbing or ignoring instruction is to our detriment. But if we seek the wisdom of others, we can grow exponentially. So today I also want you to ask yourself these questions: Am I like Moses? Do I seek God’s guidance in the wisdom of others? Who is my Jethro?

It strikes me that this would be a very helpful spiritual discipline; to regularly ask, “Who might have more wisdom than I do for this situation?” and then go to them for counsel. If we made this into a *practice* or *habit*, then we could walk forward in confidence, saying the words of Proverbs 8:14, “I have counsel and sound wisdom; I have insight; I have strength.”

If we want to be wiser and stronger, we should to seek the instruction of another. But we don’t have to stop there! We can expand this idea as Proverbs does. If you read the whole book, you’ll see that a body of proverbs encourages us to have *many* counselors.⁹ For example, here is Proverbs 11:14, “Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.”

Humility begins to grow when we welcome rebuke, and when we realize it is safe, beneficial, and good to seek the instruction of a trusted counselor. But when we take this to the next level and seek the wisdom of many counselors, that’s when we’re set up to thrive!

I'm sure most of us have at least one trusted friend or mentor from whom we ask advice. But how many of us have a *bunch* of counselors? It's hard enough to admit we don't know it all and to open ourselves up to one person, so it can feel intensely vulnerable to open ourselves up to the feedback of *many*! But this is one of the greatest potential blessings of Christian community. In theory, the church is a safe community. We should see the people in these pews as a rolodex of trusted advisors! Here we are just a call away from Godly wisdom.

Another reason why we should have *many* counselors is that human counselors are fallible. Your regular mentor might be in a bad headspace when you go to them with a problem; they might give you bad advice. But when we consult many counselors, we can compare their advice. Finding consensus among trusted advisors gives us confidence that we are on a good path.

Consider the example of 1 Kings 22. There, the King of Israel wanted to know if he should go to battle against the King of Syria. Syria had taken some land from Israel and Israel's king wanted to reclaim it. Unsure if this was the right thing to do, the King of Israel consulted the King of Judah *AND 400 prophets of the Lord* before he made his decision! Consulting 400 prophets seems a bit much, but you get the intent.

God's people had a habit of seeking out their prophets, priests, and elders for counsel. They knew they could approach their leaders and ask for counsel on any matter. We can follow this example. As we build relationships, we discover wise people at church, in our community groups, neighborhoods, and workplaces. We can add these people to our "advisors list" and seek them out as needed. We can ask them to join us in prayer and discernment and then listen for the wisdom God has given them. So, who do you have on your "advisors" list? Do you need to add some more names?

Let's return to Proverbs 15 and look to verse 33 for a concluding thought. It says this,

"The fear of the LORD is instruction in wisdom, and humility comes before honor." Today we've discovered three key practices in becoming humble – welcoming correction, welcoming instruction, and having many counselors. Beneath that practical stuff is the bedrock wisdom of fearing the Lord. Paul Taylor will unpack the

fear of the Lord in his next Proverbs sermon. But shortly explained, fearing the Lord is living in such a way that recognizes the greatness of God and recognizes our own immaturity and imperfection in comparison.

As fallible humans before an almighty, all-knowing God, we know we cannot compare. We don't know all, even when we think we do. We sin and are often wrong and misguided. But because God loves us, we have a chance to grow in wisdom and to reflect his character more and more. We are made in God's image, but it's when we are humbled, that we begin to reflect his image more brightly. May we always remember that "humility comes before honor."

Endnotes

- 1 Mark 8:33
- 2 Psalm 51:1-3
- 3 See Proverbs 13:18 and 10:17.
- 4 See Proverbs 10:17, 1:23, and 13:18.
- 5 See Proverbs 3:11-12.
- 6 Numbers 12:3
- 7 Exodus 18:17-18.
- 8 See Proverbs 1:7, 4:13, 10:8, 10:17, and 13:20.
- 9 See Proverbs 8:14, 11:14, 15:22, 20:18, and 24:6.