

LESSON 3

Correcting With Love

How do we correct without crushing?

Brothers, 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. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

—Galatians 6:1-2

Introduction

In the first movement of this workbook, we are learning to see one another through God's eyes and to care for one another without pretense. Neither of those practices stays theoretical for long. Sooner or later, a brother or sister in Christ will fall into sin, drift into error, or step off the path. The question is not whether. The question is how the church responds when it happens.

Paul's answer to the Galatians is clear. When someone is caught in a transgression, correction is the work of the body, and it is to be carried out in a spirit of gentleness. This is what genuine care looks like when the issue at hand is not a flat tire or an empty pantry but a life veering away from Christ. Care that refuses to correct is not care at all. It is flattery wearing a friendlier mask. But correction that refuses to be gentle is not correction either. It is combat with a Bible verse in hand.

This lesson walks through what Paul actually tells the Galatians to do, and how it differs from what most congregations settle for on either end.

The New Testament Assumes Correction Will Happen

A congregation that never corrects anyone is not a healthy congregation. It is a sleeping one.

The writers of the New Testament assume otherwise. Paul tells Timothy to "reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim 4:2). He tells Titus that an elder must be able to "instruct in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it" (Titus 1:9). He urges the Thessalonians to "admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all" (1 Thess 5:14). Jesus himself gives a step-by-step process for a brother who sins against another brother (Matt 18:15-17). James closes his letter by pointing to "whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering" (Jas 5:19-20).

Correction is not a sign that something has gone wrong in a church. Correction is a sign that something is right. The members of the body belong to one another. What touches one member matters to the others. A body that does not feel the misstep of a foot has lost the nerve between foot and brain.

The question is never whether the church will correct. The question is how.

What Paul Tells the Spiritual to Do

Read the opening phrase of Galatians 6:1 again. "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him." Every phrase of that sentence pulls weight.

"Caught." The word suggests that the sin has been exposed, not merely suspected. Paul is not granting permission for the curious to go hunting for faults. He is describing what the church should do when sin has surfaced in the life of one of its own.

"You who are spiritual." Not every Christian is equally suited to this work. The one doing the restoring has to be walking by the Spirit. A member nursing his own bitterness, or one who has a history of grinding down anyone who disagrees with him, is the wrong person for this assignment. The corrector's own life matters.

"Should restore him." The Greek verb behind "restore" is *katartizō*, and it is a physical word. Ancient writers used it for setting a broken bone back in place and for mending a torn fishing net. Correction is mending work. The body is not healed when the break is exposed. The body is healed when the bone is set, held, and allowed to knit. Paul has that same picture in view.

Restoration is the goal. Winning the argument is not the goal. Proving the error is not the goal. Even getting the offender to admit the error is not yet the goal. The bone is set so the member can walk again. Anything short of that has not finished the job.

In a Spirit of Gentleness

Paul tells the Galatians how the restoration is to be done: "in a spirit of gentleness."

The Greek word is *prautēs*. It is the same word Jesus uses when he calls himself "gentle and lowly in heart" (Matt 11:29). Paul uses it a few verses earlier in Galatians 5 in the list of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:23). *Prautēs* is not weakness. It is strength under control. A war horse trained well enough to respond to the slightest touch of the reins is *praus*. Power that has learned to do exactly what is needed, and nothing more.

Gentleness in correction is not a softness that refuses to name the sin. It is a strength that names the sin without crushing the brother. The one being restored is not an enemy. He is a fellow soldier who has fallen, and the aim of the approach is to pick him up and get him back into ranks.

That rules out a few things.

It rules out public embarrassment where a private word would have served. Matthew 18:15 tells the one sinned against to go alone, first. The circle widens only if the first attempt fails.

It rules out using the truth as a weapon. James warns that the same tongue can bless and curse, and that this ought not to be (Jas 3:9-10). Words that happen to be true can still be used to injure. Gentleness asks not only whether the thing being said is right, but whether the saying of it aims at the brother's good.

It rules out a smugness that treats another Christian's sin as a trophy. Paul's very next words in Galatians 6:1 are "Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted." The one doing the correcting is one step away from needing correction himself.

Keep Watch on Yourself

That phrase tends to get rushed past. It should not.

The largest failure mode in congregational correction is not excessive gentleness. It is self-righteous severity. A brother goes to confront another brother, and somewhere in the middle of the conversation his aim shifts. He came to restore, but he stayed to scold. He started with mending, but he ended with proving. The difference is subtle, and it almost always announces itself in tone before it announces itself in words.

Paul knows this. His warning is not paranoia. It is pastoral realism. The flesh is never so alive as when a Christian sits in judgment of another Christian. The very act of correcting is a temptation, and the one doing it has to watch his own steps while he watches his brother's.

Paul says something similar elsewhere. "Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor 10:12). The strongest Christian in the room is still a Christian, still sustained by grace, still capable of drift. The corrector comes humbly or he does not come rightly.

This is why restoration is not a social-media post, not a confrontation from across a room, not a text message, not a letter read aloud. It is a conversation in which one Christian sits with another Christian, remembers his own need for grace, and speaks truth in a way that invites a return rather than forces a retreat.

Bearing Burdens, Not Assigning Them

Paul continues. "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

The verb for "bear" is *bastazō*. It is the same word Jesus uses when he speaks of taking up a cross (Luke 14:27). Burden-bearing is heavy lifting. When a brother has fallen into sin, the weight of that sin does not rest on him alone. The body that truly belongs to him steps in and shoulders some of the load.

This is why correction handled well often includes more than a single conversation. The first step names the problem. The steps that follow carry the brother back. That may mean meeting weekly to pray. It may mean holding him accountable for a specific pattern over months. It may mean walking with him through the consequences of the transgression rather than leaving him to sort those out alone.

The law of Christ, Paul says, is fulfilled this way. Love expressed in practical weight-sharing. The brother who has fallen is not a case to be processed and dismissed. He is a burden the body carries until he can carry his own weight again.

Absent that, correction collapses into indictment. A verdict without a plan for restoration is not the New Testament's vision. A brother left to heal on his own is a brother more likely not to heal.

Matthew 18: The Procedure Jesus Gave

Jesus gives a procedure for correction within the body. It deserves a careful reading.

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. (Matt 18:15-17)

Three things stand out.

The circle starts small. The first step is private. Not a broadcast, not a sermon with the offender in view, not a group text. A one-on-one conversation aimed at gaining the brother. Most correction, done well, should end here.

The goal is restoration at every stage. Jesus repeats the word "listen" three times. Each widening of the circle is another attempt to have the brother hear, turn, and be restored. The procedure is not designed to build a case against him. It is designed to give him every chance to come back.

The final step is serious. If every effort fails, the offender is treated as an outsider. That is not rage. It is the honest naming of a state the offender has chosen by refusing the church's appeal. Even then, the shape of the response remembers how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors. He called them to come back. Matthew wrote this Gospel. He knew whom Jesus had kept pursuing.

Matthew 18 is not a weapon. It is a path. A congregation that skips steps has confused efficiency with obedience.

James 5: What's Actually at Stake

James closes his letter with a sentence that names what is actually on the table.

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (Jas 5:19-20)

Save his soul from death. Cover a multitude of sins. James is not exaggerating. A Christian who drifts unchecked drifts toward disaster. The church's willingness to correct is part of how God keeps his people on the way.

That reframes what can feel awkward or intrusive. Correction done in love is not meddling. It is rescue. The brother who is wandering may not welcome the intervention in the moment. He may resent the first word. But the rescue is for his soul, and a soul is worth the awkwardness.

Congregations that lose the nerve to correct lose members. Not to discipline. To death, drift, and despair that no one felt close enough to name.

Correction is Not Criticism

One last distinction, because the two are often confused.

Correction aims at the brother's good. Criticism aims at the critic's relief. Correction restores. Criticism vents. Correction goes through the channels Jesus gave. Criticism announces itself through gossip. Correction ends with repentance and embrace. Criticism ends with the satisfaction of having said the thing.

A congregation full of critics is a miserable congregation. A congregation willing to correct is a gentle one, because it has learned the weight of what it is doing. The critic wants to be heard. The corrector wants the brother to be restored.

The test is simple. Would the one being corrected recognize the love behind the correction? If the answer is probably not, the spirit is off and the words should wait.

Looking to Jesus

Jesus is the pattern for correction that aims at restoration.

Consider how he handles Peter. Peter denies him three times, publicly and bitterly, in the courtyard of the high priest. After the resurrection, Jesus does not ignore the denial, and he does not punish it. He meets Peter on the shore, feeds him breakfast, and asks three times, "Do you love me?" One question for each denial. The repetition is not cruelty. It is mending. Peter is restored by the same number of words that broke him, and Jesus hands him back the same work he always had. "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17).

Consider how he handles the woman caught in adultery. The crowd wants to stone her. Jesus refuses the crowd's terms and refuses the sin at the same time. "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more" (John 8:11). Mercy and correction in one sentence. He does not pretend the sin did not happen. He does not pretend the woman is beyond help.

Consider how he handles the disciples in the upper room. He knows one will betray him and one will deny him. He washes the feet of both. He tells them the truth about what is coming. He calls them friends. The correction is in the telling. The love is in the towel.

This is the pattern. Truthful, patient, personal, aimed always at restoration, always bearing more weight than it asks the other person to bear. The church that corrects in the spirit of Jesus will not run out of brothers and sisters. It will keep finding them and bringing them home.

A Final Encouraging Word

A congregation willing to correct is a congregation that takes its members seriously. That is a gift, not a threat. A brother who will tell you the truth about your drift while kneeling beside you is worth more than a hundred friends who will let you fall.

That kind of gentleness does not come out of nowhere. It is the fruit of the Spirit working in a heart that has known its own need for mercy. The one who has been restored knows how to restore. The one who has been loved through his own mess knows how to love another through his.

Your congregation already has members who do this work quietly and well. The calling is not to invent it. The calling is to strengthen it, to extend it, and to refuse the easier paths of silence and gossip. When the church has the courage to restore in a spirit of gentleness, souls are saved, burdens are lightened, and the body grows stronger by another bone set right.

Correction done in love is one of the most Christlike things a congregation ever does.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does Paul assume that someone in the church will eventually need correction? What does it say about the health of a congregation when no one ever corrects anyone?

2. The Greek verb behind "restore" (*katartizō*) was used for setting a broken bone and mending a torn net. How does that physical picture change the way you think about confronting a brother or sister in sin?

3. What does it mean to correct "in a spirit of gentleness"? Name something gentleness refuses to do, and something it insists on doing.

4. Paul warns the one who corrects to "keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted." Why is correcting another Christian such a dangerous moment spiritually, and what safeguards does that warning suggest?

5. Read Matthew 18:15-17 carefully. Where do congregations most often fail to follow the steps Jesus laid out? What gets lost when the procedure is skipped or reversed?

6. Think of a time when someone corrected you in love and you received it well. What made that conversation land? What does that memory ask of you the next time you see a brother or sister drifting?