

Reproof a Christian Duty

by Charles Finney

Reproof is a command from God, necessary for saving individuals and communities from sin, and maintaining a clear conscience.

Scripture: Leviticus 19:17, Ezekiel 3:18

Topics: "Reproof", "Christian Duty"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the Christian duty of reproving sin among neighbors, rooted in love for God, the community, and the individual. He argues that failing to rebuke sin is tantamount to complicity in it, and that Christians must act in accordance with God's command to avoid bearing the sins of others. Finney outlines the reasons for this duty, the manner in which it should be performed, and the exceptions to the rule, urging believers to be courageous in their reproofs to foster a righteous society. He warns against the dangers of silence and encourages a proactive approach to confronting sin, highlighting the potential for reproof to lead to repentance and salvation. Ultimately, he calls for a consistent and faithful practice of this command to uphold God's honor and the well-being of the community.

Transcript

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

THE whole verse reads thus; "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him." In the margin, as those of you who have Bibles with marginal notes can see, the last words of the verse are rendered, "that thou bear not sin for him." And this, I am satisfied, is the correct translation. The idea is this:

THAT MEN ARE BOUND TO REPROVE THEIR NEIGHBORS FOR SIN, LEST THEY BECOME PARTAKERS WITH THEM, OR ACCESSORY TO THEIR SIN.

In speaking from these words I design to pursue the following order:

- I. To show the reasons for the rule laid down by God in the text.
- II. Show to whom the rule is applicable.
- III. Mention several exceptions which God has made to the rule, or classes of persons who are not to be reproofed for their sins.

IV. The manner of performing this duty.

V. Several specific applications of the principles established.

I. I am to show the reasons for the rule.

1. Love to God plainly requires this.

If we really love God, we shall of course feel bound to reprove those that hate and abuse him and break his commands. If I love the government of the country, should I not reprove and rebuke a man who should abuse or revile the government? If a child loves his parents, will he not of course reprove a man that abuses his parents in his hearing?

2. Love to the universe will lead to the same thing.

If a man loves the universe, if he is actuated by universal benevolence, he knows that sin is inconsistent with the highest good of the universe, and that it is calculated to injure and ruin the whole if not counteracted; that its direct tendency is to overthrow the order and destroy the happiness of the universe. And therefore, if he sees this doing, his benevolence will lead him to reprove and oppose it.

3. Love to the community in which you live, is another reason.

Not only love to the universe at large, but love to the particular people with which you are connected should lead you to reprove sin. Sin is a reproach to any people, and whoever commits it goes to produce a state of society that is injurious to every thing good. His example has a tendency to corrupt society, to destroy its peace and to introduce disorder and ruin, and it is the duty of every one who loves the community to resist and reprove it.

4. Love to your neighbor demands it.

Neighbor, here, means any body that sins within the reach of your influence; not only in your presence, but in your neighborhood, if your influence can reach him, or in your nation, or in the world. If he sins he injures himself, and therefore if we love him we shall reprove his sins. Love to the intemperate induces us to warn him of the consequences of his course. Suppose we see our neighbor exposed to a temporal calamity, say his house on fire. True love will induce us to warn him and not to leave him to perish in the flames. Especially if we saw him inclined to persist in his course, and stay in the burning house, we should expostulate earnestly with him, and not suffer him to destroy himself, if we could possibly prevent it. Much more should we warn him of the consequences of sin, and reprove him, and strive to turn him, before he destroys himself.

5. It is cruel to omit it.

If you see your neighbor sin, and you pass by and neglect to reprove him, it is just as cruel as if you should see his house on fire, and pass by and not warn him of it. Why not? If he is in the house, and the house burns, he will lose his life. If he sins and remains in sin, he will go to hell. Is it not cruel to let him go unwarned to hell? Some seem to consider it not cruel to let a neighbor go on in sin till the wrath of God comes on him to the uttermost. Their feelings are so tender that they cannot wound him by telling him of his sin and his 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.

6. To refuse to do it is rebellion against God.

For any one to see rebellion and not to reprove it or lift his hand to oppose it, is itself rebellion. It would be counted rebellion by the laws of the land. The man who should know of a treasonable plot, and did not disclose it or endeavor to defeat it, would be held an accessory, and condemned as such by law. So if a man sees rebellion breaking out against God, and does not oppose it or make efforts to suppress it, he is himself a rebel.

7. If you do not reprove your neighbors for their sin, you are chargeable with their death.

God holds us chargeable with the death of those whom we suffer to go on in sin without reproof, and it is right he should. If we see them sin, and make no opposition, and give no reproof, we consent to it, and countenance them in it. If you see a man preparing to kill his neighbor, and stand still and do nothing to prevent it, you consent, and are justly chargeable as accessory; in the eye of God and in the eye of law, you are justly chargeable with the same sin. So if you see a man committing any 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 says God 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 thy hand." This is true of all men. If you suffer a neighbor, who is within reach of your influence, to pass on in sin unwarned, he will die in his iniquity, but his blood shall be required at your hand.

8. Your silence encourages him in sin.

He is authorized to infer from your silence that you approve his sin, or, at least, that you do not care for it. Especially if he knows you as a professor of religion. It is an old maxim that silence is consent. Sinners do regard your silence as a virtual sanction of what they do.

9. By reproofing your neighbor who sins, you may save him.

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

10. If you do not save the individual reproofed, your reproof may save somebody else that may be acquainted with the fact.

Such 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. ~~~~~Who can doubt that, if professors of religion were faithful in this duty, men would fear encountering their reproofs, and that fear would deter them from such conduct, and multitudes who now go on unblushing and unawed, would pause and think, and be reclaimed and saved? Will you, with such an argument for faithfulness before you, let sinners go on unrebuked till they stumble into hell?

11. God expressly requires it.

The language of the text is, in the original, exceedingly strong.

The word is repeated, which is the way in which the Hebrew expresses a superlative, so as to leave no doubt on the mind, not the least uncertainty as to the duty, nor any excuse for not doing it. There is not a stronger command of God in the Bible than this. God has given it the greatest strength of language that he can. "Thou shalt in any wise rebuke him"—that is, without any excuse, "and not bear his sin," not be accessory to his ruin. It is a maxim of law that if a man knows of a murder about to be committed and does not use means to prevent it, he shall be held accessory before the fact. If he knows of murder which has been done, and does not endeavor to bring the criminal to justice, he is accessory after the fact. So by the law of God, if you do not endeavor to bring a known transgressor to repentance, you are implicated in the guilt of his crime, and are held responsible at the throne of God.

12. If you do it in a right manner, you will keep a conscience void of offense in regard to your neighbor, whatever may be his end.

And you cannot do this without being faithful in the reproof of sin. A man does not live conscientiously, towards God or man, unless he is in the habit of reproofing transgressors who are within his influence. This is one grand reason why there is so little conscience in the church. In what respect are professors of religion so much in the habit of resisting their consciences, as in regard to the duty of reproofing sin? Here is one of the strongest commands in the Bible, and yet multitudes do not pay any attention to it at all. Can they have a clear conscience? They may just 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 has additional guilt, who knows of sin and does not reprove it. He breaks two commandments. First, he becomes accessory to the transgression of his neighbor, and then he disobeys an express requirement by refusing to reprove his neighbor.

13. Unless you reprove men for their sins, you are not prepared to meet them in judgment.

Are you prepared to meet your children in the judgment, if you have not reproved nor chastised them, nor watched over their morals? "Certainly not," you say. —But why? "Because God has made it my duty to do this, and he holds me responsible for it." Very well. Then take the case of any other man that sins under your eye, or within reach of your influence, and goes down to hell, and you have never reproved him. Are you not responsible? O, how many are now groaning in hell, that you have seen commit sin, and have never reproved, and now they are pouring curses on your head because you never warned them. And how can you meet them in judgment?

14. Unless you do this, you are not prepared to meet God.

How many there are, who profess to love God, and yet never so much as pretend to obey this command. Are such people prepared to meet God? When he says, "Thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor"—that is, without any excuse.

II. To whom is this command addressed?

Manifestly, to all men that have neighbors. It was addressed to all the people of Israel, and through them 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 who is under the government of God or bound to obey his commands.

III. Some exceptions to the universal application of this law.

He that made the law has a right to admit of exceptions. And the rule is binding in all cases, unless they come within the exceptions. There are some exceptions to the rule before us, laid down in the Bible.

1. God says, "Rebuke not a scorner, lest he hate thee."

There is a state of mind, where a person is known to be a scorner, a despiser of religion, a hater of God, and has no regard to his law, and not to be influenced by any fear or care for God, why should you reprove him? It will only provoke a quarrel, without any good resulting to any body. Therefore God makes such a character an exception to the rule.

2. Jesus Christ says, "Cast not your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you."

Whatever else this passage means, it appears to me to mean this, that sometimes men are in such a state of mind that to talk to them about religion would be at once irrational and dangerous, like casting pearls before swine. They have such a contempt for religion, and such a stupid, sensual, swinish heart, that they will trample all your reproofs under their feet, and turn upon you in anger besides. It is lawful to let such men go on; and your not meddling with them will be greater wisdom than to attack them. But great charity should be used, not to suppose those of your neighbors to be swine, who do not deserve it, and who might be benefited by suitable reproof.

3. Men who are in a settled state of self-righteousness, it is best to let alone.

Christ said of the Scribes and Pharisees, "Let them alone, they be blind leaders of the blind." That is, they were so full of pride and conceit, so satisfied of their own wisdom and goodness, that they cannot be reached by any reproof, and it seems best to let them alone; for if you begin to reprove them, you might as well face a north-wester as to think of making an impression on them. They will face you down, and are so full of arguments and cavils and bullyings, that you gain nothing.

IV. The manner in which this duty is to be performed.

1. It should be done always in the name of the Lord.

It is important when you reprove your neighbor for sin, always to make him feel it is not a personal controversy with you, not a matter of selfishness on your part, or claiming any right of superiority, or to lord it over him, but that you reprove him in the name of the Lord, for the honor of God, because he has broken his law. If, by your manner, you in any way make the impression on his mind, that it is a personal controversy, or done for any private motive with you, he will invariably rise up against you, and resist, and perhaps retort upon you. But if you make the impression on his mind that it is done in the name of God, and bring him right up before God as an offender, he will find it exceedingly difficult to get away from you without at least confessing that he is wrong.

2. It should always be done with great solemnity.

Above all things, do not make him think that it is just a little thing that you hint to him, but make him feel that it is for a sin against God you are reproofing him, and that it is what in your view ought to be looked upon as an awful thing.

3. You should use more or less severity, according to the nature of the case, and the circumstances under which the sin was committed.

(1.) The relation of the parties.

Your relation to the person who has been 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 relation he stands in. If a man is going to reprove a magistrate, or if an individual is about to rebuke an elder, the apostle says it must be in that way, "entreat him as a father." This relation should enter deeply into the manner of administering reproof. The relation of parents and children, of husbands and wives, of brothers and sisters, should all be regarded. So the ages of the parties, their relative circumstances in life. 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 all lost. BUT REMEMBER, that no relations in life, or relative circumstances of the parties, take away the obligation of this duty. Whatever be the relation, 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 for sin, he is not to do it as if he was expostulating with him for any injury done to himself, but with an eye to the fact that the parent has sinned against God, and therefore, with all that plainness and faithfulness and pungency that sin calls for.

(2.) Reproof should be regulated by the knowledge which the offender has of his duty.

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

(3.) With reference also to the frequency of the offense.

You would reprove a first offense. in a very different manner from what you would use towards a habitual transgressor. If a person is accustomed to sin, and knows that it is wrong, you use more severity. If it is the first time, perhaps a mere allusion to it may be sufficient to prevent a repetition.

(4.) So, also, you are to consider whether he has been frequently reprovved for the sin.

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

4. Always show that your temper is not ruffled.

Never manifest any displeasure in the transgressor, which he can possibly construe into personal displeasure at himself. It is often important to 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 an effect. The manner should be suited to the nature of the crime, yet so as not to lead him to think you have any personal feeling. Here is the grand defect in the manner of reprovving crime, both in the pulpit and out of it. For fear of giving offense., men do not express their abhorrence of the sin, and therefore transgressors are so seldom reclaimed.

5. Always reprove in the Spirit of God.

You should always have so much of the Holy Ghost with you, that when you reprove a man for sin, he will feel as if it come from God. I have known cases, where reproof from a Christian in that state cuts the transgressor to the heart, and stings like the arrow of the Almighty, and he cannot get rid of it till he repents.

6. There are many different ways of giving reproof so as to reach the individual reproofed.

Sometimes it can be done best by sending a letter, especially if the person is at a distance. And there are cases where it can be done so, even in your own neighborhood. I know an individual who chose this way of reprimanding a sea-captain for intemperance in crossing the Atlantic. The captain drank hard, especially in bad weather, and when his services were most wanted. The individual was in great agony, for the captain was not only intemperate, but when he drank, he was ill-natured, and endangered the lives of all on board. He made it a subject of prayer. It was a difficult case—he did not know how to approach the captain so as to make it probable he should do good and not hurt; for a captain at sea, you know, is a perfect despot, and has the most absolute power on earth. After a while he sat down and wrote a letter, and gave it to the captain with his own hand, in which he plainly and affectionately, but faithfully and most pointedly set forth his conduct, and the sin he was committing against God and man. He accompanied it with much prayer to God. The captain read it, and it completely cured him; he made an apology to the individual, and never drank another drop of any thing stronger than coffee and tea on the whole passage.

7. Sometimes it is necessary to reprove sin by forming societies, and getting up newspapers, and forming a public sentiment against a particular sin, that shall be a continued and overwhelming rebuke. The Temperance societies, Moral Reform societies, Anti-Slavery societies, &c. are designed for this end.

V. I will mention now some of the cases in which these principles are applicable.

They are peculiarly applicable to those crimes which are calculated to undermine the institutions of society, and to exert a wide-spread influence. Such sins can only be held in check and put down by faithfulness in reproof.

1. Sabbath breaking.

If Christians would universally mark transgressors, and rebuke them that trample on the Sabbath, they would do more to put a stop to Sabbath breaking than by all other means. If Christians were united in this, how long do you suppose it would be before this sin would be put down? If only a few were faithful, and constant, and persevering, they might do much. If only a few do it, and these only now and then, it might not have much effect. But I believe if all professors of religion were to do it, every grocery and grog shop and oyster cellar and fruit stand would be shut up. At all events, they are bound to do it, whatever may be the results; and so long as they neglect their duty, they are chargeable before God with all the Sabbath breaking in the city. If all the churches and ecclesiastical bodies in the land were united to remonstrate with the government, and would continue to do it, firmly and in the name of the Lord, do you suppose that government would continue to violate the Sabbath with their mail? I tell you, no. The church can do this, I believe, in one year, if all were united throughout the country and could speak out fully, in the fear of God, and without any fear of man. No man, who ever expected to be elected to office again, would ever again advise the breaking of the Sabbath. But now, while the church is divided and not half in earnest, there are

so few speak out that Congress despises them, and pays no attention. Thus it is that the church connive at Sabbath breaking, and they are without excuse, till they speak out and rebuke their rulers, in the name of Jehovah, for breaking his holy law.

2. Intemperance and rum-selling.

Suppose every man in this city that sells rum were continually subject to the rebukes which God requires—suppose every man that passed by were to reprove him for his sin, how long could he sell rum? If only the church were to do it, if that deacon and that elder would do it, and every Christian would follow him with rebukes in the name of the Lord for poisoning men to death with rum, he could not go on and do it. Such a strong and decided testimony would soon drive him from his trade of death. In self-defense, he would have to yield to the pressure of solemn rebuke.

3. Lewdness.

This is a wide-spreading evil, that ought to be universally rebuked.

It should be rebuked unsparingly, not only from the pulpit, but by the press, and in the street, till it is driven out from its strong holds, and made to hide itself in the chambers of hell.

4. Slavery.

What! shall men be suffered to commit one of the most God-dishonoring and most heaven-daring sins on earth, and not be reprov'd? It is a sin against which all men should bear testimony, and lift up their voice like a trumpet, till this giant iniquity is banished from the land and from the world.

VI. I shall consider some of the difficulties which are sometimes raised in the way of the performance of this duty.

1. It is often asked, Is it a duty to reprove my neighbor when there is no prospect of doing any good?

I answer, it may be very essential to reprove sin in many cases where there is no prospect that the individual whom you reprove will be benefited. As in cases where your silence would be taken for connivance in his sin. Or where the very fact of his being reprov'd may prevent others from falling into the like crime. 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, duty is yours, consequences God's.

2. It is asked, Should I reprove strangers? Why not? Is not the stranger your neighbor? You are not to reprove a stranger in the same way that you would a familiar acquaintance, but the fact of his being a stranger is not a reason why he should not be reprov'd, if he breaks the command of God. If a man swears profanely, or breaks the Sabbath, in your presence, his being a stranger does not excuse you from the duty and the responsibility of administering reproof, or trying to bring him to repentance and save his soul.

3. It is asked, Should we reprove a person when he is drunk?

Generally not, for when a person is drunk he is deranged. There may be cases where it is proper, for the purpose of warning others. But so far as the drunkard himself is concerned, as a general rule, it is not expedient. Yet there are many cases, where reproof to a man even when drunk, has taken such a hold on

his mind as to sober him and turn him from his beastly sin.

4. Shall we reprove great men, and those who are above us in society, and who may look down on us and on our reproofs with contempt?

That does not alter your duty. "Thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not bear sin for him." You should bear in mind the relation in which he stands and treat him accordingly. But still, if he sins against God, it is your duty to reprove him, in an appropriate manner.

REMARKS.

1. Do not talk about people's sins, but go and reprove them.

It is very common to talk about people's sins behind their backs, but this is great wickedness. If you want to talk about any person's sins, go and talk to him about them, and try to get him to repent and forsake them. Do not go and talk to others against him behind his back, and leave him to go on in his sins, unwarned, to hell.

2. How few professors of religion are sufficiently conscientious to practice this duty.

I suppose there are thousands in this city, who never think of doing it. Yes; professors of religion live in habitual disobedience to this plain, and strongly-expressed command of God. And then they wonder why they do not have the spirit of prayer, and why there are not more revivals! Wonder!

3. See why so few persons enjoy religion.

They live in habitual neglect of this command, making excuses, when God has said there shall be no excuse. And how can they enjoy religion? What would the universe think of God, if he should grant the joys of religion to such unfaithful professors?

4. We see that the great mass of professors of religion have more regard to their own reputation than to the requirements of God.

The proof is, that sooner than run the risk of being called censorious, or of getting enemies by rebuking sin, they will let men go on in sin unrebuked, notwithstanding God says, "Thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor." But I shall offend him if I reprove his sin. In any wise rebuke him, says Jehovah. It shows that they have greater fear of men than of God. For fear of offending men, they run the risk of offending God. Yea, they absolutely disobey God, in one of his plainest and strongest commandments, rather than incur the displeasure of men by rebuking their sins.

5. No man has a right to say to us, when we reprove him for his sin, that it is none of our business to meddle with him.

How often do transgressors tell faithful reprovers, they had better mind their own business and not meddle with what does not concern them. And they are called meddlers and busy bodies, for interfering in other people's concerns. At the south, they have got themselves into a great rage because we at the north are trying to convince them of the wickedness of slavery. And they say it is none of our business, that slavery is a matter peculiarly their own, and they will not suffer any body else to interfere with them, and they require us to let them alone, and will not even allow us to talk about the subject. And they want our northern legislatures to pass laws forbidding us to rebuke our southern neighbors for their sin in holding

men in slavery. God forbid that we should be silent. Jehovah himself has commanded us to rebuke our neighbor in any wise, let the consequences be as they may. And we will rebuke them, though all hell should rise up against it.

Are we to hold our peace and be partakers in the sin of slavery, by connivance, as we have been? God forbid. —We will speak of it and bear our testimony against it, and pray over it, and complain of it to God and man. —Heaven shall know, and the world shall know, and hell shall know, that we protest against the sin and will continue to rebuke it, till it is broken up. God Almighty says, "Thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor," and we must do it.

So the rum-dealer is all the while pleading, "It is none of your concern what I do, please to mind your own business and let me alone." But it is our business to reprove him when he dispenses his poison, and it is every body's concern, and every man is bound to rebuke his crime till he gives it up and ceases to destroy the lives and souls of his neighbors.

6. We see the importance of consistency in religion.

If a man professes to love God, he ought to have consistency enough to reprove those that oppose God. If Christians were only 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 Christian rebuke. If Christians were not such cowards, and absolutely disobedient to this 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 they would be speedily converted to God.

What shall we say then to such professors of religion? Afraid to reprove sinners! When God commands, not prepared to obey! How will they answer it to God?

Now, beloved, will you practice this duty? Will you reprove sin faithfully, so as not to bear sin for your neighbors? Will you make your whole life a testimony against sin? Will you clear your souls, or will you hold your peace and be weighed down with the guilt of all transgressors around you and within the sphere of your influence? God says, "Thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not bear sin for him."

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