

GOD'S WORD REBUKES + + +

PASTOR ZACH ZEHNDER

Well, good morning, church. So good to be with you. I hope you're enjoying the start of 21 days of prayer and a new year, certainly honored to open up God's Word and see what he has for us today. My brother-in-law, Peter, who's the campus director at Northwest Omaha, kind of talks fondly about the first time he met my dad. My dad, if you don't know, was a preacher here at King of Kings for a few decades and retired a few years ago.

One of the things you may not know about preaching that I feel like is just something that happens is if you're going to preach about a particular topic, like the enemy tries to do what he can about that in your own personal life. For example, if you're preaching on spiritual warfare, expect spiritual warfare. If you're preaching on patience, expect something to try to make you patient. If you're preaching about being in the fire, expect to go through the fire, sort of thing. Sometimes after the fact, you kind of embody your sermon.

I think this might've been what happened with dad when he met Peter. Peter was newly dating my younger sister, Karista. I do think, and I don't know this personally because I don't have a daughter, but if you're the dad of the daughter, you're supposed to make the guy feel kind of uncomfortable, kind of assert your dominance. The way my dad did this, and I think he just preached on it, is he just started rebuking everything. "I rebuke that. I rebuke that." He would just use the word "rebuke" all the time around Peter. If things weren't as they ought to be, "I rebuke that." If he believed things that he didn't want to believe, "I rebuke that." Like yesterday when my brother texted, the Huskers are down 15, probably going to lose. Dad would have said, "I rebuke that." If he didn't like the amount of salt on the potatoes, "I rebuke the potatoes." Just rebuke, rebuke, rebuke. Thankfully, it was a weird season that only lasted for a month. Peter, welcome to the family.

I say that today because I'm preaching about rebuking. So if you hear me in the next month rebuking a lot of stuff, just know that it's, you know, kind of like father, like son.

We hear these incredible words from 2 Timothy 3:16-17 that form our sermon series this month. They're written by the apostle Paul: "All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." I think it's important to talk about the author behind these words because he was rebuked in Acts chapter 9 and now he's the one writing these words.

We get introduced to the apostle Paul who writes these words. At that time he went by Saul and was a chief persecutor of Christians. He was on the Damascus road, going from one city to the next to persecute and have some martyred for their belief in Jesus. It was on that Damascus road where God met Saul and rebuked him.

The voice of God sounded like this: "Saul, Saul," which by the way, in new and old Testament times, when God says your name twice, that's the modern equivalent of your first, middle, and last name

being said by your mom and dad. "Listen up, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And he was knocked off his high horse.

Up until that point, Saul was a devout Pharisee. While we might say he was an evil man, he was actually a pretty law-abiding citizen, a moral person, wealthy, rising politically, had fame, was young, and had everything that many of us in this world would want to strive for. This is when God met him, rebuked him, knocked him off his horse, and told Saul he was headed in the wrong direction.

We see a sharp turn now in Saul, who would become Paul, going from chief persecutor to lead apostle and author of 2 Timothy 3:16-17 — where in just two verses, one sentence, we get to hear who wrote scripture, its uses, and what it's meant to do; that it's meant to produce in us and equip us to do good works.

We are working through this scripture using each one of those four uses. Last week we talked about how all scripture teaches and what the Bible teaches us. We learned that this is God's word and we need to learn more of it to know who God is and who we are. No one argues with that in the Christian faith. We agree that scripture is useful for teaching.

We like that word "teaching." It's important to learn. When we think of teaching, we think of Sunday school and VeggieTales, and "The Bible is a lamp unto my feet." But this word "rebuking" — that's kind of a different word choice. Not a lot of people say it. So today, I want to talk about rebuking.

The definition of rebuke is to criticize or sharply disapprove of someone because of something they said or did. In a culture where inclusivity is revered and everybody's comfort reigns supreme, I think we have an odd relationship with the word and concept of rebuke.

In some ways, our culture really pushes people to be confrontational and individuals. We tout self-confidence and honesty as valuable traits. We're taught it's okay to challenge ideas, engage in debates, and question authority. We teach people to stand up for themselves and advocate for their rights. We celebrate reality TV stars who are confrontational and argumentative, using their harsh nature to get ahead because it's just more fun to watch.

Yet, I can speak from personal and pastoral experience that even though that's all true, many people aren't comfortable, especially in person or in private conversations, dealing with conflict or saying hard things. I see two extremes.

One extreme is wanting to avoid hard confrontation and conflict — the things that probably should be talked about. So people keep it to themselves, stuff it down or inside, and hope it never boils over. That's not a healthy way to handle conflict.

The other extreme is jumping right to publicly blasting someone on social media, talking about them behind their back, gossiping, sharing one side of the story, and then clapping back if confronted. That's not healthy either.

You might find yourself on one side of those two extremes or somewhere in between, but with all this, you might think, well, if rebuking leads to all this negative stuff, maybe it's not for our day. It leads to

division, anger, hostility, polarization, rage, this side against that side. Maybe it's something we should avoid.

Yet, rebuking is one of the four uses of all Scripture that Paul talks about. So my goal today is to give you a healthier perspective on the word and how to use rebuke godly.

I believe when we struggle with things like this, the best thing we can do is look at Jesus. He is a great model and example, besides being our Lord and Savior. Amen?

Let's look at Jesus — how, when, why, and how He rebuked — so we can understand a healthier idea of what this looks like in our life.

When Jesus rebuked, there are quite a few instances in the Gospels. For example, in Luke 9, a boy possessed by an evil spirit, whose father begs Jesus to help. Luke 9:42 says the demon threw the boy to the ground and convulsed him. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. All were astonished at the majesty of God.

In this story, Jesus rebukes an evil spirit — the enemy. Jesus is never afraid to go toe to toe against the most evil.

In another instance, the disciples were on a boat in a storm with waves crashing over the side. Jesus was taking a nap. When the disciples woke Him, Jesus said, "Why are you afraid? Oh you of little faith," then He rose and rebuked the winds and the sea. There was a great calm. The men marveled, saying, "What sort of man is this that even the winds and sea obey him?" Here, Jesus rebukes elements of creation — wind and waves.

One more story in Luke 9: Jesus and disciples go into a Samaritan village and are not received well. James and John want to call fire down from heaven to destroy the village. Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went on to another village.

Jesus even rebukes people He genuinely loves: evil spirits, nature, and His disciples.

What's the common thread? Jesus rebukes when things are not as they ought to be. Jesus, the Word of God, knows God's perfect will, and when the will of God is not being done, Jesus rebukes so that God's will will happen.

Why does Jesus rebuke? Not to condemn or destroy — He is a God who lifts up. He rebukes to bring about a 180-degree change, a sharp turn.

Sometimes we need sharp turns in life. The evil spirit had to be removed so the boy could be who God made him to be. The storm had to be calmed so disciples could get safely to the other side. The disciples' attitudes needed to turn when going into a new village.

When things or people get in the way of God's will, Jesus uses rebuke to bring back God's will, even if that means a sharp turn.

Because He is for His will, He is against anything against His will. So too, as much as we are for love and good fruits of the Spirit, we must be against hate and evil.

Sometimes sharp turns are needed when we do not see fruits of the Spirit. Mental health struggles like anxiety, loneliness, and stress are at all-time highs; that is not God's will. We need a sharp turn mentally, spiritually, and socially.

Recently, I've thought a lot about this in relation to our church body, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. Many pastors and leaders feel the need for a 180 turn in raising up leaders and pastors. It's not that God isn't calling leaders, but we're struggling to identify healthy pathways to form pastors to serve all churches in the denomination.

I heard many complaints and decided to bring objective data through a survey of more than a thousand leaders. I've had many private conversations with people from all sides and felt it was time to shine light and truth on how we're feeling, especially locally with our vision at King of Kings.

We have a vision to have 10 campuses in 20 years and started this two years ago — loving to see what God is doing through Peter and my dad's legacy in Northwest Omaha and in merged churches in Fremont. It's the gospel bringing light to new areas.

Yet many pastors feel that the institution struggles to raise and form effective leaders for these future campuses.

Somebody has to say something. So I've been saying something, trying to do it the right way — reaching out privately first, using my forum for public conversations, using objective data.

I don't regret using my voice, but I don't always get it right.

Once, a fellow pastor contacted me privately—not to shame or pile on— but to say, “I believe you've erred in a couple ways and want to talk.” We talked on the phone, and he said, “Zach, bring light but don't bring unnecessary heat.” This was a loving rebuke.

He gave examples and helped me see that rebuking doesn't always (and shouldn't often) be loud and public, but quiet and personal.

His words didn't shut me down; they sharpened me and pulled me back to be more like Christ.

That is what godly rebuke does — it doesn't aim to win arguments, but to redirect hearts and bring sharp turns where needed.

That's why Jesus rebukes.

How does Jesus rebuke? Well, it's easy for us to get off course. The world pushes its opinions, feelings, and thoughts on us. It's easy to get off course.

Moreover, all scripture reminds us there is a real enemy prowling around seeking to devour us.

Some lies you may believe: “The closer I get to God, the more the enemy attacks me, maybe I’m doing something wrong.” I’d challenge you: you’re doing everything right.

The closer you get to Jesus, expect persecution. Expect the enemy to show up because you’re moving from spectator to participant — which frustrates the enemy.

If you need proof, look at Jesus in Matthew 4. He spent 40 days in prayer and fasting. The enemy tempted Him three times, each time Jesus responded with, “It is written.”

“It is written” are the three most powerful words to combat the enemy’s lies.

Do you know God’s word well enough to respond with “It is written” when the enemy comes to devour you?

Our mental health struggles come largely from listening to lies more than truth. It’s challenging when many spend hours on devices and only minutes in God’s word.

I’m not above this. In seminary, I once wrote a sermon that received a low grade; a professor said it wasn’t creative. I began to believe that I wasn’t creative.

I told my mom, who, loving me, rebuked me gently: “That’s a lie of the enemy. You are one of the most creative people I know.”

I needed that sharp turn mentally.

Research from the American Bible Society shows that those who regularly engage with God’s word experience significantly lower anxiety, fear, and distress.

God’s word truly lowers stress; this is not just old wisdom or self-help but the living, active word of God.

The word “It is written” in Greek is “gegroptai,” meaning engraved, chiseled, etched, and finished — not flimsy but permanent.

Do you know this engraved, chiseled word of God?

It’s easy to lose sight of why we’re here and get off course. Sometimes, we need a sharp turn.

To recap on rebuke:

- When does Jesus rebuke? When things aren’t as they ought to be.
- Why? To bring about a sharp turn.
- How? To bring truth overcoming the enemy’s lies.

Jesus not only rebuked with words but also gave His life to accomplish these things — through His life, death, and resurrection.

Jesus came because we are not who we ought to be; sin separates us from God, and we cannot earn or deserve forgiveness by our own efforts.

But a sharp turn is still needed — that's why Jesus came. Through His death on the cross, we make the sharp turn from broken, separated sinners to chosen, forgiven, redeemed sons and daughters.

He came to overcome the enemy's lies that say you are less than or that this isn't for you.

Jesus rebuked evil spirits, storms, disciples, but His greatest rebuke came from the cross — to the devil, death, and sin itself.

It's one Greek word: "tetelestai," meaning "It is finished."

Think about it — Jesus began His ministry saying "It is written" and ended it on the cross saying "It is finished."

He went to the grave to engrave His word and His work within you.

If He was just a powerful man who died and didn't rise, His words could be erased.

But He is God who faced sin, death, and the devil and said, "It is finished."

From "It is written" to "It is finished," gegroptai to tetelestai.

We are somewhere in the middle now, but we have the finished, etched word of God working in us because of "It is finished."

"It is written" was His battle cry in the wilderness. It is our battle cry.

"It is finished" was His victory cry at the cross. It is our victory cry.

It is written. It is finished.

This is the word of God—active, alive, breathed out by God, engraved, finished for you.

In a world filled with lies, will you be the person who hears truth over and over and then gives that truth to someone else who desperately needs it?

God, we thank you that You are the one true God who meets us where we are with Your word of love, grace, and forgiveness.

Forgive us when we are off the path that You have called us to.

Some of us need a sharp turn to stop working our way back to You through our own strength and simply receive Your gift of grace.

Thank You for finishing the work and the word at the cross.

It's in Your name we pray, and together the church says, Amen.