

Biblical Rebuking

What It Is, What It Isn't, and How to Do It Well

The concept of rebuking in Scripture is often misunderstood and misapplied. Some Christians use it as a reflexive response to anything uncomfortable, while others avoid it entirely out of a desire to “not judge.” Neither extreme reflects what the Bible actually teaches. This brief guide is intended to help clarify what biblical rebuking is, when it applies, and how to do it in a way that honors God and serves others.

What Is Biblical Rebuking?

At its core, biblical rebuking is **lovingly confronting a fellow believer who is engaged in sin, with the goal of restoration and repentance**. The Greek word most commonly translated as “rebuke” in the New Testament is *elegchō*, which means to expose, reprove, or convict someone of wrongdoing.

The heart behind a rebuke is always love and restoration; never punishment, shame, or self-righteousness. Think of it as a spiritual course correction: you see a brother or sister heading toward a cliff, and you lovingly call out to them.

Key Verses:

- **2 Timothy 3:16–17** — “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”
- **Proverbs 27:5–6** — “Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.”
- **Matthew 18:15** — “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over.”
- **Galatians 6:1** — “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.”

An Important Distinction: Two Greek Words for “Rebuke”

One of the biggest sources of confusion around rebuking comes from the fact that our English Bibles use the same word “rebuke” to translate two very different Greek words that carry distinct meanings. Understanding this distinction is critical to applying Scripture correctly.

***Epitimaō* — A Command of Authority**

When Jesus “rebukes” demons, storms, or sickness, the Greek word used is *epitimaō*. This is a command of divine authority, a “be silent” or “get out” directed at spiritual forces or the natural world. We see this in Mark 1:25, where Jesus rebukes an unclean spirit, and in Mark 4:39, where He rebukes the wind and the sea. This is the exercise of Christ’s sovereign authority over creation and the spiritual realm.

Jude 1:9 and Zechariah 3:2 also use this framework, with Michael the archangel saying “The Lord rebuke you” to Satan. This is spiritual authority exercised vertically; directed at the demonic, not at people.

***Elegchō* — Correction and Restoration**

When Paul instructs Timothy to “rebuke” fellow believers (2 Timothy 4:2), or when Jesus lays out the process in Matthew 18:15, the word used is *elegchō*, to expose, convict, or reprove. This is relational and restorative, not authoritative and combative. It is one believer lovingly pointing another back toward truth.

Why This Matters

The confusion arises when people take the *epitimaō* model; Jesus commanding demons, and apply it to everyday human interactions. This leads to “I rebuke that” being aimed at a person’s words, a question, or even a Bible verse someone posted. They are essentially using the spiritual warfare framework where the pastoral correction (*elegchō*) framework actually applies, or where no rebuke is called for at all.

To be clear: exercising spiritual authority over the demonic is not reserved exclusively for Jesus. Scripture shows us that Jesus explicitly delegated this authority to His followers. In Luke 9:1, He gave the Twelve “power and authority over all demons,” and in Luke 10:17, the seventy-two returned saying, “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.” Paul exercises this authority in Acts 16:18 when he commands a spirit out of a slave girl “in the name of Jesus Christ.”

However, there are critical guardrails. This authority is always *delegated*, never inherent; every time a believer exercises authority over the spiritual realm in Scripture, it is “in the name of Jesus.” It is His authority flowing through them, not their own. Even Michael the archangel did not rebuke Satan under his own power but said, “The Lord rebuke you” (Jude 1:9). If an archangel will not claim that authority as his own, that should give us pause.

Scripture also gives us a cautionary tale. In Acts 19:13–16, the seven sons of Sceva attempted to invoke the name of Jesus as a formula to cast out demons without actually being in relationship with Christ. The evil spirit responded, “Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?” .. and overpowered them. Spiritual authority is not a magic incantation; it flows from genuine relationship with Jesus.

So the core issue remains: even acknowledging that believers do participate in delegated spiritual authority over genuine demonic forces, that is *still* a completely different

category from lovingly correcting a fellow believer (*elegchō*). And it is certainly not something to aim at a person in your community who asked a hard question or posted a challenging verse. The problem is not that people believe in spiritual authority, it is that they misidentify what they are dealing with and reach for the wrong tool.

What Biblical Rebuking Is NOT

This is where many well-meaning believers get off track. Understanding what rebuking is *not* is just as important as understanding what it is.

It is not a defensive weapon.

Rebuking is not something we deploy when we feel uncomfortable, challenged, or confused. If someone asks a difficult theological question or quotes a hard passage of Scripture, that is not a moment for rebuke.. even if it feels like an attack. That is a moment for discernment: Is this person seeking? Confused? Provocative? Each requires a different response, but none of them require a rebuke.

It is not the same as spiritual warfare.

Spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:10–18) is real, but it is specifically about standing firm against the schemes of the devil. Rebuking a person for posting Scripture, asking a theological question, or saying something you don't understand is not spiritual warfare. Conflating uncomfortable human interactions with demonic activity can lead to a posture where every challenge feels like an attack from the enemy, which actually prevents genuine growth and learning.

It is not “rebuking word curses.”

The idea that spoken words from other people carry curse-like spiritual power that must be actively “rebuked” is not found in Scripture. While Proverbs teaches that words have weight and impact (Proverbs 18:21), the biblical response to hurtful or false words is truth, wisdom, and prayer, not a formulaic verbal rebuke. Our security is in Christ (Romans 8:31–39), not in our ability to detect and counter every negative word spoken over us.

It is not silencing questions.

1 Peter 3:15 calls us to “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” If we are publicly representing Christ; especially in ministry, we will encounter hard questions. That is not a threat; it is an opportunity. Shutting down questions and treating them as spiritual attacks can push seeking people away from the very gospel we are trying to share.

When Should We Rebuke?

Biblical rebuking applies in specific circumstances, not as a catch-all response:

- **When a fellow believer is living in ongoing, unrepentant sin** (Matthew 18:15–17)
- **When false teaching is being spread within the body of Christ** (Titus 1:13, 2 Timothy 4:2)
- **When a believer’s actions are causing harm to themselves, others, or the church** (1 Corinthians 5:11–13)
- **When done from a place of genuine love, humility, and your own self-examination** (Galatians 6:1, Matthew 7:3–5)

Notice what all of these have in common: they involve **known sin or false teaching within the believing community**, not strangers asking questions or posting hard Bible verses.

How to Rebuke Properly

Scripture gives us a clear model:

- **Start privately.** Go to the person one-on-one first, not publicly (Matthew 18:15).
- **Check your own heart first.** Examine your motives. Are you acting out of love, or out of anger, pride, or discomfort? (1 Corinthians 16:14, Galatians 6:1)
- **Be specific and rooted in Scripture.** A rebuke should point to a specific behavior and a specific biblical truth, not vague feelings of spiritual unease.
- **The goal is always restoration.** The purpose is to bring the person back to the right relationship with God, not to punish or shame them (James 5:19–20).
- **Do it with gentleness.** “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1). The spirit in which a rebuke is delivered matters as much as the content.

A Note for Digital Ministry

If we stream under Christian tags, share the gospel publicly, or represent Jesus in digital spaces, we are effectively planting a flag that says “ask me about my faith.” That is a beautiful and courageous thing. But it comes with a responsibility: people **will** come with hard questions, provocative statements, and challenges. Some will be genuine seekers. Some will be trolls. Discernment is knowing the difference.. and responding to each appropriately.

When we don’t know the answer to something, the most Christ-like response is honesty: “That’s a great question and I don’t have a good answer right now, but I’d love to look

into it.” That response builds trust, shows humility, and keeps the door open. Banning, rebuking, or dismissing hard questions as spiritual attacks does the opposite, it closes doors and can push people further from the gospel.

We do not need to have all the answers. We do not need to be seminary-trained theologians. We simply need to be honest, humble, and willing to learn. God will handle the rest.

“Speak the truth in love.” – Ephesians 4:15