

Reprove thy neighbor (Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5:38-48)

## **It's not immediately clear what this command means.**

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It's a puzzling juxtaposition: "You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself." I'm pretty sure I've broken the first half of this commandment about a zillion times in recent months. Especially if we define *kin* broadly speaking to include all fellow humans (which seems a reasonable interpretation in this era when global connectedness has largely eclipsed the power and necessity of small, local kinship groups).

I seem to be adept, however, at fulfilling the second half of the command--at least on the surface. But I'll admit that I had to look up the word to figure out exactly what it meant before confirming that I am, indeed, quite skilled at reproof. In English, *reprove* most often connotes scolding with an undercurrent of kindness or caring intent. It's the kind of thing I find myself constantly doing with my young daughters. Ideally, I reprove my children with good intentions: to keep them from danger, help them develop good social skills, and encourage them to make decisions that attend to the wellbeing of others.

But the biblical use of the word translated here as *reprove* is more complex. It can mean to dispute, judge, chasten, argue, correct, or prove. Its connotations are not generally kindly ones. In fact, it doesn't ascribe any intent to the one who reproves, so its exact meaning depends upon context.

When God is the one who reproves, it can connote forgiveness (as in Isaiah 1:18, "Come, let us reason together: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow") or corporal punishment (as in 2 Samuel 7:14, "When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use.") As Job talks with his friends about the nature of God, they use the word repeatedly with adversarial connotations. Abraham reproves Abimelech after the king's servants seize one of Abraham's wells.

It's not immediately clear what it means, this command to reprove our neighbors. It probably doesn't mean what I want it to mean on my worst days--that I have a free pass for rendering angry judgments or wishing ill will against anyone whose views are opposed to mine simply because of how they vote or what rhetoric they use to describe their view of the world. After all, the first half of the verse tells us not to harbor hatred in our hearts. When I find myself harboring anything resembling hatred against those I label as hating others, I'm neither pleasing God nor contributing positively to the world's healing.

But it also doesn't mean that we are to stand by quietly without rendering any judgment at all while the world moves on around us. That would be to "incur guilt" ourselves. To reprove as God commands means neither to abstain from judgment nor to judge willy-nilly. It requires that we hone our reactions to the world's injustices in some particular ways:

- **Reproving is straightforward and direct.** As opposed to the passive-aggressive "in our hearts" that comes naturally to some Christians (perhaps especially to those who, like me, live in the upper Midwest), to reprove the neighbor means to engage face to face. Rather than reproving behind someone's back or in the echo chamber of social media fury, we should talk directly to those people we are reproving.
- **Reproving is rooted in relationship.** When you have a relationship with someone, it's hard to hate them. In today's world, relationship may be loosely defined, and we may at times be called to reprove people we've never met. But at the very least, we should view all those who we reprove as our brothers and sisters in God's family.
- **Reproving is necessary, but so is humility and a willingness to self-correct.** Not only are we the person in this verse who is being commanded to reprove the neighbor; we are also the neighbor who needs to be reprovved by

others.

- **Reproving is holy work.** Recall that this command is framed by a more general one: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." It may be easy to shrug off Matthew's adaptation of this verse into "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48) as an impossible utopian ideal. But being holy is something that we can and should unceasingly work toward, even as we know that any holiness we possess is a gift from God.

Reproving the neighbor directly, through a generous hermeneutic, and with the humility that comes from knowing that we too are sinful--this may be precisely the kind of holy work to which we are currently being called.