I tend to be something of a contrarian, meaning that when something becomes trendy my instincts tell me to stop doing it. For example, I am currently struggling with the fact that Formula One is now kind of popular in the United States. My enjoyment of Formula One used to be a sort of personality quirk that was maybe a little endearing. When I was a kid, if you wanted to see a real live race you had to go to somewhere like Austria or Belgium, but this year there are three races in the United States and Brad Pitt is making a movie about it, which makes me feel a little morally compromised. My son Auggie thinks I need to switch my allegiance to Turkish Oil Wrestling in order to maintain this contrarian nature. I will let you know what I decide. And while this quirk is not really that detrimental to larger society when it comes to my taste in sports it can get a little dicey when it comes to sermon topics. Today’s reading, especially the ones from Ezekial and Matthew are about the need to sometimes tell other people what they are doing wrong and since this seems to be the main occupation of much of society these days, I have an inclination to stay away from it. But generally, when my instincts tell me to avoid something I start feeling guilty. Meaning that by the fact I don’t want to preach about it is probably the exact reason I should preach about it. So, gather round it is time to hear about all the ways we can correct other people’s behavior while feeling good about ourselves.

Let’s start with the two verses where correction is explicitly mentioned. In Ezekial we hear this command from the lips of God, “You shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked ones, you shall surely die,’ and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand.” To quickly summarize if someone is doing something wicked and we do not tell them to stop doing that wicked thing then we are just as guilty as they are. The second passage comes from Matthew and is a little longer. Here Jesus says, “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” It is similar but gives us a little more in terms of the procedure. But, in both cases we are not simply advised that we might need to correct people but are rather commanded to correct others.

So, what are we to do in a world where much of the poison and vitriol that infect day to day life come from individuals demanding that others change their behavior? Certainly, we could say that what we are offering a different kind of correction a type that is not concerned with trivialities like politics or sports but deals with cosmic right and wrong. The stuff that is labeled as wickedness in Ezekial and sin in Matthew. And this may certainly be true but it steers us into another, potentially more serious, problem. And that problem is in our day and age there is a very free for all view of what is right and wrong. That is we are not united on the basic definitions. The historian Paul Johnson described the 19th century understanding of morality in his book *Modern Times* as, “the philosophy of personal responsibility — the notion that each of us is individually accountable for our actions — which was the joint heritage of Judeo-Christianity and the classical world.” He further argues that this understanding was replaced in the 20th century by a relativistic model where we can all determine our own definition of right and wrong and are responsible to no one but ourselves. Trying to issue a correction in this environment is difficult because the rules are not universally accepted. How do you correct someone for violating God’s law when they do not believe that there is such a thing as God’s law? To give a sports example it would be like calling pass interference at a baseball game. Pass interference is a real thing but not in the context of baseball. We live in times where truth is relegated to no higher authority than ourselves. You hear it expressed in phrases like “speaking your truth,” which is meant to sound profound but really does not make a whole lot of sense unless you are merely talking about different people having different perspectives. And certainly, we all see things a little bit differently, but historically there has generally been agreement with the notion that there was something greater than ourselves to which we must submit. And this brings us back to the question of how do we go about correcting people who believe themselves to be arbiters of the truth? I don’t know that I can offer a one size fits all approach to solve this problem but I think there is one small thing that we can keep in mind as we go to correct others.

The small thing that I want to suggest is that all forms of correction should generally take place within the context of a relationship. Yes, certainly if we see someone about to get hit by a car we should yell for them to get out of the way. We do not need to wait until you have a real and abiding relationship. But generally speaking, correction is most effective when we care about the person not in the abstract but in terms of a real relationship. For so much of our correction of other people’s behavior these days takes place in the abstract. We get mad at categories of people not actual people. We need to make sure that we don’t find ourselves saying things like those people need to do this or not do that. We should know the names of the people we are talking about. For it is in the context of knowing another person that we can correct. Put another way we should not offer our opinion when we have not even bothered to know the person we are correcting.

Yes, we certainly live in times where there is no common agreement on the basic rules and this is a real shame. But sitting around complaining about it and haranguing people for being so wrong does not seem to be helping. Rather we need to take time to understand why people are the way they are. To care enough to engage with them on an individual level. These days the term love gets bandied about as a kind of get out of jail free card – if you loved me, you would let me do whatever I want. But love truly understood has more to do with wanting what is truly best for the other person. It is caring enough to take the time to understand. The person in need of correction may be horribly and even laughably wrong and in desperate need of correction. But if the correction does not come from a place of love and understanding it is just going to be more noise in our already noisy world. And the final piece is that this is not a one-way street. If we are going to correct the behaviors of others, we must also be willing to accept correction of our own behaviors. For none of us are perfect. We are all struggling to try and live in God’s will. We all have blind spots that can only be seen by others. Correction is necessary for all, including ourselves, so that we may be God’s own this day and forevermore.