

True Love Admonishes

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Though only used eight times in the New Testament—all by Paul (7x in his Epistles; 1x in Acts)—the word “admonish” lays a special charge on believers.

While only commanded as “admonish one another” in two places (Romans 15:14 and Colossians 3:16), the command is implied in all its uses, with especial consideration for leaders. To get a sense of its meaning consider these eight verses. The word *noutheteō* is bolded in each instance.

- “Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.” (Acts 20:31)
- “I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.” (Romans 15:14)
- “I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children.” (1 Corinthians 4:14)
- “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.” (Colossians 1:28–29)
- “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16)
- “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13 and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. 14 And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.” (1 Thessalonians 5:12–14)
- Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. (2 Thessalonians 3:15)

Seven Ways the Church is Called to Love through Admonition

You can see that the ESV translators render *noutheteō* as admonish, instruct, and warn. Each of these translations get at the meaning of the word. For it certainly includes serious instruction and warning, as well as an urgent plea to avoid wrong-doing. Still, it’s the surrounding contexts which bring this command to light. For sake of space, let me summary what we find.

1. *Admonition requires endurance and emotion.*

As Paul says he admonished with tears the Ephesians every day for three years (Acts 20:31). Admonishment is not mere information transferal; it requires the soul of the “teacher” to plead for the souls of others. It takes time and takes a toll on the “admonisher,” hence it is often the work of the spiritually mature.

2. Admonition depends on a genuine knowledge of God's Word.

It cannot simply mean "telling someone like it is" or saying hard things. Lots of people speak strongly with no attention to God's Word, no design encourage or strengthen faith. Genuine admonition comes from wisdom found only in God's Word (Romans 15:14; Colossians 3:16), and is aimed at improving the spiritual condition of the hearer, or at least protecting them from their folly.

3. Admonishing goes beyond teaching.

Twice in Colossians (1:28; 3:16) Paul couples "admonishing" with "teaching" (*didaskō*). In these instances, the primary stress is not on teaching but imploring the hearers to do what the teaching instructs. In this way, admonishment pleads in earnest for the hearer to obey the teaching. As Jesus said in Matthew 28:19, disciples must be taught to obey. Teaching alone won't produce obedience; admonishment is necessary.

4. Admonition is personal.

While it's possible, in theory, to admonish a stranger, these eight examples display Paul admonishing those whom he knows well. Again, he spent three years with the Ephesians, 18 months with the Corinthians whom he calls "beloved children" (1 Cor 4:14), and he calls for the Thessalonians to respect those who "labor among them . . . and admonish them"—hence implying that the ones who do the most admonishing (local pastors) know well the people whom they instruct and warn. Additionally, the context for admonishing is in the local church among disciples seeking to obey God's commands; it will only disaffect those outside the church.

5. Admonition is aimed at worship.

In Colossians 3:16, the goal of admonition is to sing "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God." In other words, admonition doesn't aim at ethics alone, but Spirit-filled exultation in the Lord. This doxological end comes through teaching and admonition that pours out of a heart filled with the word of God. In this way, admonition presses the hearer to consider the Word of God and to express his thankfulness in praise to God.

6. Pastors are lead admonishers.

Surely, as the word only flows from Paul's pen, he is the lead admonisher in the Bible. However, in 1 Thessalonians he calls the local church to respect their elders and receive from them biblical admonition (cf. Hebrews 13:17). The temptation for church members is to harden their hearts against those called to speak the truth in love. They may grow embittered at those who point out their sins and challenge them to walk worthy of the gospel they hold. Accordingly, pastors who are charged to admonition must proclaim the gospel of grace, and not just a message of morality. At the same time, church members must labor to hear Christ's message through their fallible prose. Woe to the church that does not have leaders who admonish; in time it the weeds of antinomianism will swallow that garden-temple.

7. The church is a body of admonishers.

While pastors lead in admonishing one another; they are not alone. Romans 15:14 expresses Paul's confidence in all the Christians in Rome. Because they were filled with goodness and

spiritual knowledge, he commands them to admonish one another. In truth, this might not be a universal command to immature and fickle Christians, but only to those who are filled with goodness and the spiritual wisdom. But to those who have the word of God dwelling richly within them, admonition is a normal and necessary part of church life.

Dear Church: Love One Another Through Biblical Admonition

Proverbs regularly commends the wise man as one who receives and invites correction (9:8; 13:1; 17:10; cf. Psalm 141:5). And not surprisingly, to a people who have received the Spirit of wisdom through faith in the gospel, Paul says to admonish one another and, by extension, to receive instruction, correction, and warning.

For Paul, there is no separation between love and law (see Romans 13:8–10; Galatians 5:13–15), personal ethics and personal embrace. In fact, to abandon ethics and affirm others in their sin would be the height of hatred. Rightly, Paul's ethic requires him to admonish those who are straying from the truth. This is evident from his use of the word *noutheteō* and from a general consideration of his letters. To his beloved children in Corinth (1 Corinthians 4:14) he writes piercing words. And to those who are most exemplary in faith, hope, and love, he says, "excel still more" (1 Thessalonians 4:1).

In truth, Paul models for us what true love is. It is not the modern sentimentality that says, "Whatever you do, I will accept you." Such a naïve statement, endorses someone's road to hell. Rather, with eyes fixed on the eternal chasm between heaven and hell, Paul teaches us to live and labor for the eternal good of others. This is what is truly loving. And such love necessarily includes biblically-grounded, Spiritually-empowered admonition.

May God equip his saints and build his churches in this age of acceptance, as we learn together to love another through biblical admonition.