ANSWER: Let’s examine what Scripture teaches:

1 Timothy 5:1–2 (NIV)

> *“[1] Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers,*
> *[2] older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.”*

1 Timothy 5:20 (NIV)

> *“[20] But those elders who are sinning you are to reprove before everyone, so that the others may take warning.”*

Two Distinct Contexts: Correction vs. Public Rebuke

The apostle Paul, writing to Timothy—his young protégé and a

pastor in Ephesus—outlines two approaches to dealing with sin and misconduct in the church. These approaches are based on the context and the spiritual condition of the individuals involved.

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1. Gentle Correction in the Spirit of Love (vv. 1–2)

In verses 1–2, Paul emphasizes a pastoral and respectful tone when addressing members of the church, especially in matters that may involve immaturity, ignorance, or unintentional failure.

Paul instructs Timothy not to sharply rebuke an older man, but to exhort him as he would a father. This reflects the principle of honoring age and spiritual growth (cf. Leviticus 19:32). Similarly, younger men should be addressed as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters—with all purity. This language reinforces the idea of the church as a spiritual family (Galatians 6:10), where relationships are to be governed by respect, compassion, and moral integrity.

Such correction applies to less severe offenses—such as poor judgment, lack of decorum, or immature behavior—not to entrenched sin. The goal is not condemnation but restoration (Galatians 6:1), helping believers grow in holiness without

damaging their dignity.

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2. Public Rebuke for Persistent, Willful Sin (v. 20)

In verse 20, the context shifts dramatically. Here Paul refers to those who continue in sin—meaning individuals who have been confronted but refuse to repent. In this case, Paul directs Timothy to rebuke them publicly (“before everyone”) so that others may fear and be warned.

This echoes the biblical principle of church discipline, as taught by Jesus in Matthew 18:15–17 and practiced in the early church (cf. Acts 5:1–11; 1 Corinthians 5). The goal of public rebuke is twofold:

- To call the sinner to repentance (2 Corinthians 7:9–10)
- To preserve the purity and testimony of the church (1 Corinthians 5:6-7)

Paul is not endorsing public shaming but calling for accountability for those who willfully undermine the holiness of the body of Christ. Persistent sins such as sexual immorality, drunkenness, divisiveness, or false teaching (Titus 3:10) must not be tolerated within the fellowship.

This kind of rebuke also serves as a deterrent: it creates a holy fear and soberness in the church, reminding others that sin has serious consequences (cf. Hebrews 10:26–31).

Grace and Discipline in Balance

The message in these passages reflects a balance between grace and discipline. God is patient and desires that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9), but He is also holy and expects His people to live in righteousness (1 Peter 1:15–16).

The church is not a place of legalism, where every misstep is met with harshness, but neither is it a place where sin is ignored or excused. Pastors and leaders, like Timothy, are called to shepherd the flock with wisdom—knowing when to guide gently and when to take strong action for the health of the body.

So, should people be rebuked or not rebuked? The answer depends on the nature of the sin and the heart of the sinner.

- If the offense is minor or unintentional, the believer should be corrected gently and respectfully, taking into account age and relationship within the church.

- If the sin is persistent and deliberate, especially after private correction, the offender should be rebuked publicly to uphold the integrity of the church and warn others.

May the Lord give us wisdom and courage to uphold both truth and grace in our leadership and fellowship.

Feel free to share this teaching with others.

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