

HOW TO PULL ON A DOG'S EAR

A sermon by Pastor Michael Jackson



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"It's none of your business!" The retort was sharp and fast. Josey had questioned whether her friend Anna could truly afford the new suit and blouse that she had hanging over her arm. The price tags reflected the fact that the items did not come from the clearance rack. Now the chill in the air communicated clearly that Josey had overstepped her bounds.

Josey's situation raises an important point. When should we offer unsolicited advice?

- A co-worker at the plant has yet to discover the purpose of deodorant,
- A classmate at school is always and forever making other people run late,
- A friend at church spreads gossip like a four-year-old spreads peanut butter,
- A buddy at the health club is having marriage problems and you know exactly what he or she needs to do in order to fix things up,
- Your spouse just doesn't have a clue on how to manage money,
- Your daughter-in-law could use a few pointers on cooking.

Do you see what I mean? The possibilities are endless. People have needs – multiple needs. If we wanted too, we could go from house to house, person to person, and do nothing other than give free advice to other people.

As a rule, though, people do not readily receive such instruction. How many of you have ever heard the phrase, "If I had wanted your opinion, I would have asked for it!"? Let me tell you something important here. People mean that.

Last week I heard Marcus Buckingham speak. He is the author of an excellent book entitled, *Now, Know Your Strengths*. In fact, I liked the book so well I have required each one of the staff pastors to read it. Anyway, Buckingham spent 17 years with The Gallup Organization studying and surveying business leaders and business trends around the world. During his studies he found 372 things that people around the world, regardless of where they are, hold in common. For instance.

- Regardless of where you go in the world, people tickle. People in Borneo tickle, people in the rain forest of the Amazon tickle. People in the U. P. of Michigan tickle. Understand?
- Regardless of where you go, people enjoy a good joke,
- People love family and people love children,
- Fear is also universal: fear of outsiders as well as a fear of the unknown.
- People have a strong desire to be able to see into the future. Always have; always will.

Buckingham went over a list of several of these 372 things.

When he was finished, I wanted to raise my hand and say, Mr. Buckingham, you missed one. Regardless of where you go on this vast planet, people have a strong aversion to unsolicited advice. They really do!

"But pastor, the Bible says..." I know what the Bible says. It tells us to get involved in other people's lives.

- Paul told Timothy that there are times when we must reprove and correct.
- Galatians 6:1 instructs those who are spiritual to go to a brother who has been found to be in sin.
- The older ladies are to instruct the younger women.
- As our brother's keeper, we are commanded at times to get involved even when getting involved might not be the easiest or the most welcomed thing in the world.
- Proverbs 24:11-12 (*The Message*) declares, "**Rescue the perishing; don't hesitate to step in and help. If you say, 'Hey, that's none of my business,' will that get you off the hook?**"

Someone is watching you closely, you know—Someone not impressed with weak excuses.”

What is a person supposed to do? To advise or not to advise, that is the question.

Well, I have ten distinct rules that I think will help keep you between the white lines of what the other person would want and what the Scriptures require.

1. PRAY

“If any man lacks wisdom he should ask God...” James 1:5.

Seek divine guidance on how to approach, when to approach, and even if you should approach. The Lord told the Prophet Nathan to go and rebuke King David. On the other hand, others were commanded specifically not to go and speak into another person’s life. You see, some were ready to hear or receive, while others weren’t. God knows who is tender and ready. Seek Him.

Then too, I have found that most of the times when God has given me a word of correction, it was not meant for someone else. It was meant for me. Ask God to clarify His message. Who is it really for? It could be for self; it could be for someone else. God knows for sure. Ask Him.

2. TIMING IS EVERYTHING

If you have ever attended my marriage class, then you may well remember one of my more controversial bits of advice: “Time The Fight Right.”

A good fight is a managed fight. The wise Solomon noted in Ecclesiastes 3:1,7: **“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak.”**

For instance,

- **Don’t fight just prior to going off to work.**
- **Don’t fight as soon as you get home from work.**
- **Don’t fight during mealtime.**
- **Don’t fight on the way to or from church.**
- **Don’t fight in some public place or in front of your children or relatives.**
- **Don’t fight at bedtime.**

I do not want to take the time this morning to amplify on those points. I did that in the class. However, timing is equally important when one has a word of advice or correction to offer.

Can the person heed the advice? Take this counsel, for instance: “You should have been more kind to your father when he was alive.” Well, it is too late to give that advice. The person can’t do anything with that counsel. Such advice should have been given before the brother died. The timing is no longer right.

Will the person receive the advice? Ask:

- Is your wife going through PMS?
- Has your husband had a run-in with the boss?
- Did your daughter just break-up with her boyfriend?
- Is the person ill?

Before you approach another person, scope out the terrain. How do things look? This is a great place to consider the Golden Rule: **“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”** When would you want to hear what you are about to offer?

Hey, I am not denying the fact that the word might need to be given, I am just asking, is this the best time to give it? Again, pray. Seek God’s guidance. If it is important enough to say it, it is important

enough to say it at just the right time. Many a great word has been lost because of poor timing.

Proverbs 25:11 (*God's Word*) says, “**{Like} golden apples in silver settings, {so} is a word spoken at the right time.**” Conversely speaking, like rotten tomatoes in a cardboard box is a word spoken at the wrong time.

3. DON'T MAKE IT A HABIT

The wise Solomon wrote, “**Like one who seizes a dog by the ears is a passer-by who meddles in a quarrel not his own.**” (Proverbs 26:17) Obviously, the writer was not high on offering unsolicited advice.

Even though I am a pastor/counselor, I have made it a policy to try not to tell others what they should or should not do unless we are talking about clearly defined Biblical guidelines. It is hard enough, most of the time, to run my own life, let alone someone else's.

Don't get me wrong...

- I can help others sort out their options.
- I can be a sounding board.
- I can respond if they ask for my opinion or guidance.
- I can listen.

However, being a preacher, a friend, a mother-in-law, or a husband does not grant any of us a license to toss directives right and left. While such free advice might be well intended, it can also become a means of serious control.

No one should try to control another person's life unless he or she is willing to be responsible for that person's life.

I well remember Jim and Susan (not their real names). Someone spoke into their lives that they should marry each other. They were both single, older, and anxious to find a spouse. So, they married. It was horrible mistake. They couldn't have been anymore incompatible – in my opinion.

She ended up having a long-running affair. Her husband was depressed and half blamed God for his being in the relationship. I was their pastor. I have no idea how much time I spent trying to get all of the knots out of their marriage. The unsolicited advice was bad advice – really bad advice!

To offer some balance here, I want to share with you the story of Moses and his father-in-law Jethro. Moses was not only the leader of some three million people, he was also their judge. Jethro came to him and asked, “**Why do you alone sit as judge?... You cannot handle it alone....**” Exodus 18:14, 18) Jethro then went on to warn his son-in-law that he (Moses) would soon become weary and even exhausted. Then too, the people would be worn out, waiting for their turns to present their cases.

Wisely, Jethro urged Moses to delegate some of his responsibilities. He was encouraged to appoint spiritually and morally qualified men as judges to implement the keeping of the Law. They were to be “**wise... respected... and leading men**” in their tribes.

Exodus 18:24 (*New Living Translation*) then points out, “**Moses listened to his father-in-law's advice and followed his suggestions.**” Verses 26-27 adds, “**They served as judges for the people at all times. The difficult cases they brought to Moses, but the simple ones they decided themselves. Then Moses sent his father-in-law on his way, and Jethro returned to his own country.**”

An interesting sidebar to this is, Jethro is only mentioned nine times in Scripture. He really didn't play that big a role in Moses' life. However, this one time he spoke a word into the leader's life and it stuck. It was a good word; a great word.

Hey, all of us give out advice on occasion. No problem. However, people who habitually toss out

words of advice or correction, may well have some control issues that he or she needs to honestly pray about and assess.

4. LIMIT THE WORD

Words of correction are like a strong medicine; best given in small doses. If you must offer a negative or corrective word, limit the negatives to no more than three, preferably one or two. Any more than that and you stand to crush rather than help the other person.

I use to live and pastor in the San Francisco Bay Area. Therefore, I had to make a number of hospital and business calls in high rise buildings. I hated it. Why? The elevators! I could only imagine being somewhere between the 34th and 35th floors when one of those silly earthquakes hit and I would be stuck there in the dark with ten people, none of whom could speak English.

As a result, I became very mindful of elevators. I discovered where the alarms were, phones, emergency lights, as well as the air vents in the ceiling -- in case I needed to climb out the top of the thing, like I've seen it done in the movies. Another thing I discovered, each elevator has a sign in it that says something like this: "Load capacity 16 passengers or 500 pounds". Hey, do the math. I have. Each person can weigh no more than 30 pounds!

In this sense, we need to see people as having load limits like elevators. Are they near or at capacity? I have had many people walk into my office who could not have tolerated one more bad thing, one more negative word, one more criticism. They had had it up to here! If anything else would have been placed on the stack he or she might have fallen like a high-rise elevator all the way to the bottom of the shaft. It was my job not to add to, but to take away from their heavy load.

Dear friends, if you feel as if you must add to some poor pilgrim's load, I implore you, first, check and see just how much is on the elevator.

5. ASK YOURSELF; IS IT YOUR PLACE TO OFFER THE ADVICE?

Maybe there is someone closer in relationship, or who is better suited to speak to the individual.

- A parent?
- A spouse?
- Maybe the person needs professional help.

Just because you see the need, does not necessarily mean that you are the one who is to address the need.

Tiger Woods seems to be in a bit of a slump right now. Am I the one who should offer counsel on how to fix his game? He is presently the highest ranked golfer in the world. I am ranked number 3,456,931! See the point? I am aware of the problem, however, I am not the solution.

When we are in over our heads, and we know that we are in over our heads,

- Maybe we should simply stay back and pray that God will send someone with a word that can help; that can make a true difference.
- Maybe we need to refer.
- Maybe, if the situation is truly serious enough to require some sort of intervention, we need to go and talk to someone who can help such as the pastor, a spouse, or parent, and try to get him or her involved.
- Maybe, God has made us aware because we are the one to go. Just be sure it is God.

6. DOES THE SITUATION MERIT YOUR UNSOLICITED ADVICE?

While a certain issue may bother you, it may not bother God – or the other person. We must learn to distinguish between an annoyance and a trespass; between a conviction and a transgression, between style and sin.

I want to share something that I wrote for the current issue of our monthly mailer: The Bible includes several lists of sins in both the Old and New Testaments. These lists can be rather extensive. However, before we go to correct, we need to decide if the offence that is about to be exposed is really a wrong. I have found that many times what I consider a sin in you I see only as a personality quirk or a matter of conviction in myself.

I remember pastoring a church where the people loved to have Rook parties. It was no doubt the second most popular form of recreation in that church. Eating, by the way, was number one. If you really wanted to have fun, then combine eating and Rook at the same event!

However, another church that I pastored hated card games – any card game. Cards were considered evil, sinful. I had to hide my Rook cards the entire time I lived there.

The confusion over the rightness or wrongness of the game stemmed from the Bible's silence in this area. The biblical writers never mentioned the game of Rook in any of their writings.

You see, when the Bible speaks, we can speak boldly and clearly. On the other hand, when the Bible is silent on an issue, such as Rook, then we have to be much more cautious when we speak. We may be speaking for God; we may be speaking for self. Be sure.

Jeffrey Zaslow, senior writer and columnist for *The Wall Street Journal*, says it's best not to offer unsolicited advice -- with a few exceptions. "There have been times when unsolicited advice has saved a life. Of course, there also have been times when unsolicited advice has ruined a life."

7. ASK PERMISSION

Phrase the question in such a way that the person has an out. It is hard to do that if you tell them that you have a "word from God." A more excellent way might be to simply say, "Do you mind if I share with you something that is on my heart? If this is not a good time, just tell me and I will keep it to myself." Advice is much easier to take if the person has indicated their desire to receive it. If they don't grant permission, then they probably won't listen to it, much less act on it, anyway. You might as well save your breath.

Unsolicited advice is a major cause of grief among friends, business associates, church members, and family. It might be seen as implying that a person is incapable of caring for himself and resolving his own issues. It can also come across as arrogant and prideful.

Yes, I understand, advice is generally free and easy today. We have a great number of advice columnists in our newspapers. Then too, our popular media has elevated advice givers like Oprah and Dr. Phil to celebrity status. We get a tremendous amount of counsel, but that doesn't always mean we necessarily welcome the counsel that we receive.

The meek person requests permission to carry on and then presses forward.

8. ANALYZE YOUR MOTIVES

- Are you certain you have the other person's best interests at heart?
- Are you motivated by love and compassion or anger and jealousy?
- Are you wanting to bless or to curse?
- Are you truly wanting to help or simply wanting to get the other person "told"?

Only you and God can really decide that.

1 Corinthians 11:31 notes, "**But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment.**" Just to be safe, analyze your heart-felt motives before you go.

9. LISTEN

James 1:19 says in part, "**Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry....**" While this rule is true for all good communication, it is doubly true when we wish to give advice.

Issues are often more complex than they initially appear. By first listening, we open a space for the speaker to more fully describe the situation and for us to more fully understand it.

Most of us in this room this morning, like those outside this sanctuary, immediately categorize things as good or bad, true or false, black or white, friend or foe. That can be truly dangerous in dealing with other people. I have found that things are rarely as they appear to be at first. The more I listen, the more I learn about a certain situation or person, the more I realize the need to move slow, to take time in handing out advice.

A good rule of thumb here is, listen first, then talk. Listen much, then talk.

It has been said, "We earn the right to be listened to by listening to others." Dr. Marshall Rosenberg notes, one needs "connection before correction." It is empathic listening that establishes the connection.

While here, I want to point out, one can usually tell what they are free to discuss by listening to what the other person feels free to discuss.

- If he or she has never talked about their personal finances,
 - If he or she has never talked about their marriage,
 - Their child's behavioral problems, for instance,
- then they probably don't want to talk about them with you.

If they do bring them up though, then the topic or topics are on the floor for discussion. It is generally best to let the other person set the boundaries on what they want to discuss or not discuss. By following their lead, we can usually stay out of harm's way.

It is worth keeping in mind that even after we have listened, we can never truly know what is best for another person. There is so much that we do not know; that we are not aware of. So we offer our insights minus the strings. We trust the other person to discern what is right for his or her own self.

10. DETERMINE THE LEVEL OF YOUR RELATIONSHIP

I know that I have shared this illustration with you before. It needs to be repeated here.

Generally speaking, we operate on **FOUR LEVELS OF FRIENDSHIP:**

The Acquaintance Level. These are people that you interact with at the grocery, the service station, etc. You may know their names, but usually not much more. Surface relationships. There is nothing of substance in the conversations.

Casual Friendship. This is the type of relationship that you may have with someone at work or even at church. You probably know their names. How many children they have. The kind of work that they do. Nothing heavy. You would not want to discuss your personal savings account or the condition of your marriage with such an individual.

Close Friendship. This is the person you would invite over for an evening or for a meal. You might even want to go places together. In other words, you would spend time with each other. You would feel comfortable together. This person might well know your health history.

Intimate Friendship. This level is reserved for one's best friend or spouse. These people have formed a deep soul connection with you. Such a person would know your fears, your concerns, your strengths as well as your weaknesses.

Generally speaking, we can offer unsolicited advice to those who are close or intimate with us. On the other hand, we would not want to go up to a complete stranger and talk to him about his failure to

tithe.

If you are curious about your level of friendship with a certain individual, ask yourself:

- How long have you been friends? True relationships require time.
- What does the OTHER person talk about with you? Again, I stress the OTHER person.
- If he or she had a significant event take place in their life, would they call you first, last, or not at all?
- How well do you really know him or her? Surface or deeper?
- Do you have their number on your speed dial?

In a true sense of the word, we earn the right to speak into another person's life. The level of your friendship will tell you whether or not you have gained that right with such and such an individual.

AS I CLOSE, some times some things need to be said. Some times we are the ones who are to say them. In those instances, I encourage you to remember:

1. Pray
2. Timing is everything
3. Don't make it a habit.
4. Limit the word
5. Is it your place to offer the advice?
6. Does the situation merit your unsolicited advice?
7. Ask permission
8. Analyze your motives
9. Listen
10. Determine your level of friendship

The same as one who grabs a dog by its ears should be very careful, so wisdom dictates that one who speaks into another's life should likewise proceed with great caution.