

Coping with Criticism • James 1:19

Over the years I've been involved in various organizations where people have applied for positions in jobs or ministries. As a result I've read hundreds, maybe thousands, of references. Often the applicant is asked how he or she deals with criticism. Usually that gets one of the lowest ratings. No one ever says they enjoy criticism or receive it with enthusiasm. Criticism is fault-finding and it often hurts. It can be demeaning, demoralizing and sometimes devastating. Even criticism that is valid and true can be hard to take. But criticism is part of life. We've all criticized other people and we have all been criticized.

The Old Testament book of Nehemiah is about one of the greatest leaders of ancient history. Nehemiah, the trusted confidant of King Artaxerxes of Persia, was also God's agent to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. He was a good man on a great mission who faced severe criticism.

St. Paul wrote more New Testament books than anybody else. He was a church planter, missionary, theologian and apostle; yet he was so severely criticized by people in the churches he started that he used much precious space in the New Testament defending himself and answering his critics.

Jesus was called a drunk, a liar and a tool of the devil.

And then there was Ethel. Ethel sat by her husband's side in his hospital room. They had been married 55 years. As she held his hand he spoke in a halting voice, "Is that you Ethel, by my side again?"

"Yes, dear," she answered.

Softly he replied, "Remember years ago when I was in the Veterans' Hospital? You were with me then. You were with me when we lost everything in a fire. When we were poor you were with

me, too. Ethel, for 55 years you've been nothing but bad luck."

Yes, even the best of people have to cope with criticism, often by those who are closest to them. But let me throw one more factor into the mix: Christian faith. When we love God and want to act like Christians in every part of life, what is distinctive about us as followers of Jesus Christ in the way we deal with criticism? Let me offer some ideas for us to consider.

Start out by listening to the criticism, at least most of the time. Probably some criticism is best not heard. For example, I've chosen to put anonymous criticism in that category. If no name or return address is on a letter I open it and look for a signature at the end. If there is no signature I throw it away unread. If I receive e-mail without a subject line from an unknown source I delete it without opening it. If I receive an article to read from someone and don't know where it came from I throw it away.

But, when criticism comes in signed letters, face-to-face conversations or personal phone calls, how should Christians re-

spond? We need to respect the critic and hear what the critic has to say. James 1:19 says, "*My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.*" We listen because the critic may be right.

Early in my ministry at Wooddale Church a man came to see me with a notebook full of criticisms. For over an hour he listed criticisms of my preaching, grammar, programs and what he didn't like about me personally. He was thorough and well organized. I listened carefully taking notes on what he said. When he finished I asked him, "What do you think is my greatest problem—that I am incompetent or ungodly?" He thought for awhile; then said, "It's both. You are ungodly and incompetent." For weeks, maybe months, I re-

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flected on what he said because I was afraid he was right. Maybe he could see the faults I couldn't see in myself.

Even if our critics are wrong we should hear them out and humbly consider what they have to say—because sometimes they are right!

King David in the Old Testament was a man who was hard to criticize. But the prophet Nathan dared to confront him about his adultery and murder. Think how much courage it would take to confront a king over adultery and murder to cover up that adultery, but Nathan did it—perhaps at the risk of his own life. David needed to hear and to listen because Nathan was right. Amazingly, David had a stunning response in 2 Samuel 12:13 when he said to Nathan, *“I have sinned against the Lord.”* David heard the criticism.

Hear what a critic says. Restate the criticism back to that person to be sure you correctly understand it. It doesn't mean that the critic is right; it's just that we need to humbly listen.

When it's time, we need to give a slow and gentle response. That's the point in James 1:19: *“My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”* Or, Proverbs 15:1: *“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”* And Proverbs 12:16: *“A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult.”* So, when we are insulted or criticized we need to take it slow. Take a deep breath. Pray a quick prayer. Think through your response. Don't escalate the situation; deescalate it. Start immediately to seek a solution. Try to turn a negative into a positive.

Consider the source. It's easy to just think of ourselves when we're criticized, but as Christians we need to think about our critics. What's happening in our critic's life? Why is this person so angry? Why is she saying these things? What is his need? Philippians 2:4-5 says, *“Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.”*

Often the criticism we receive has little to do with us and a great deal to do with the critic. Some people don't know how hurtful their words are. They have never learned how to be kind. They are not that way with just you; they are that way with

others, too. At times we need to feel sorry for the critic, not angry or insulted or upset with the critic.

Sometimes when people criticize with especially strong anger it's an indication that something else is going on in the critic's life: a lost job; poor health; low self-esteem; frustration or failure. All of these things may burst out in criticism against others.

It may simply be that you're a safe person. Hurting people often act out against parents, teachers, friends or persons in positions of authority. You are being criticized because of who you are not because of what you have done. Therefore, when we are criticized we need to make a judgment about the critic before deciding how to respond.

Let's look at two seemingly contradictory back-to-back statements in Proverbs 26:4-5: *“Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly. . . .”* What's the point here? The point is that different people require different answers. Different situations call for different responses. Sometimes we should say nothing. Sometimes we should defend ourselves or correct the person whose words are foolish. Think before you answer. Analyze the critic and the criticism. Consider the source.

Some people who are just critical. They are critical of everybody and everything. That's who they are; that's the way they live their lives. We should not reward their dysfunction by taking their words as seriously as the thoughtful, loving and careful occasional critic.

In figuring out how to respond to criticism it is good to get counsel on what to do. Seeking counsel is a recurring theme in the Bible and is simply wise to do. To figure out how to handle critics we go to God and then to other Christians.

Go to God and tell him what's happening. Ask him for wisdom. Pray out your feelings and thoughts. Ask God to give you wise ideas on how to act like a Christian in your present circumstance. Ask God if you should answer your critic or just let it go.

Then, go to a godly Christian—someone you can talk to about what has happened, someone who will listen to your hurt and give a Christian perspective, someone you can test possible responses on. Personally, I have been enormously

helped by trusted fellow Christians. They have helped me respond with strength and with love. Sometimes they have counseled me to accept the criticism and change; other times they have helped me to just laugh it off and let it go. Your Christian friend can read your e-mail before it is sent, edit your letter before it's mailed or hear you practice your speech before you speak.

But to be distinctively Christian, we should respond by actually blessing our critic. When criticism is mean-spirited and cruel we have a special charge from Jesus in Luke 6:27-28: “. . . *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.*” In other words, if our critics are mean and cruel, bless them whether they're right or wrong. This could be one of the hardest things any of us will ever have to do in life but also one of the most Christian things we'll ever do in life. Whether justly or unjustly criticized we can choose to curse or bless our critics. The Bible clearly indicates which way a Christian should choose. Romans 12:14 says, “*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.*” And in Proverbs 12:18 we read, “*Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*”

According to Jesus we should bless those who most severely criticize us and pray for them. That doesn't mean that we pray they will choke on a chicken bone or be run over by a truck. It means that we pray for their success. It means we ask God to turn a bad situation into good. It means we seek a positive solution. You may be amazed at the difference God makes in the other person's life when you pray in response to criticism rather than become upset, angry or depressed. But you may also be amazed at the difference it makes in your life.

Author and businessman Fred Smith tells about a friend who was “emotionally crucified by his critics.” Smith says this businessman's critics had profited from him and owed him gratitude not criticism. When the man died Fred Smith paged through his friend's Bible where he found a prayer list. At the top of the list his friend had written,

The best long-term response to a critic is a life well lived and a job well done.

“Pray for those who are lying about me.” How totally Christian!

When dealing with the inevitable criticisms of life as Christians let us not be shortsighted. With God's help, may we take the long view. To do this we should try to avoid criticism. As a pastor I've experienced my share of criticism in ministry. Along the way I've learned to head off some criticisms before they come. Now, I'm not going to give you examples because that would defeat my purpose, but I know there are some ways of saying and doing things that just set some people off. Some stories trigger anger. Some people are looking for things to criticize. So, I look for ways to accomplish God's purposes and teach God's truth while at the same time keeping those critics at bay.

This idea comes from the Bible. The apostle Paul was dealing with a matter that often is tied to criticism—and that is money. He was going to visit the church in the city of Corinth on his way to Jerusalem. There he intended to collect money that was to be given to poor suffering Christians in Jerusalem. But he knew there was potential for criticism in the way the money was handled, so he wrote in 2 Corinthians 8:20-21, “*We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men.*” He was far-sighted in his approach. He went out of his way to avoid criticism by his critics.

Now, that is not suggesting that we need to dance around and comply with every whim of every critic, but it is to say that we should not directly provoke criticism if we can avoid it. We need to take an approach that avoids making matters worse. There is often a temptation to hastily respond to criticism in ways that will make matters far worse in the future. Some people become their own worst enemies in the way they respond to criticism.

Specifically, don't lose your temper in writing. Actually, don't lose your temper in any way! But, think about those who respond to a critical e-mail with angry words. Then the e-mail is forwarded and copied until dozens more people are

involved. I have tried to follow a policy of never writing anything I wouldn't want read in public a year or a decade later.

The best long-term response to a critic is a life well lived and a job well done. A great story about Colonel George Washington Goethals who was in charge of building the Panama Canal illustrates this point. In addition to dealing with the enormous difficulties of weather and geography a bigger burden was severe criticism from people, politicians and the press back in the United States. When a co-worker asked him when he was going to answer his critics Goethals said, "In time." His friend asked, "When?" and Goethals said, "When the canal is finished."

That exact tactic may not always be possible but the principle is the same: Doing right over the long term is the best answer to critics. 1 Peter 2:12 says, "*Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God. . . .*" Let's reread this verse substituting "critics" for "pagans": "*Live such good lives among your critics that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God. . . .*"

One important long-term Christian action is to teach others how to criticize. We can do this by the way we criticize. Many people don't know how to love and confront. They grew up in families where they were torn down and that's all they know how to do. So, model Christian criticism for others to learn. Speak the truth in love. Be kind. Never criticize anonymously. Avoid anger. Be constructive and helpful. Check out your own criticisms by the response you get. Do others thank you? Do they smile? Do they know that you love them and care? Do they agree that you did the right thing? Of course, it's not always possible to get a positive response but that's what Christian criticism should always seek. And, most often, keep quiet. If you don't criticize well then don't criticize at all. Be the kind of critic that you want others to be to you.

Finally, let me give a special word to those who have been deeply hurt by the criticism of others. Criticism can leave wounds that never heal. Criticism can leave you discouraged and crushed for everything else in life. So, please hear this. God knows you better than anyone else. God knows your faults but he's not your critic; he's your friend. God knows your strengths and your weaknesses, your successes and your failures—and he loves you! God reaches out to help, heal, encourage, lift you over the worst of criticisms and bless you with success.

If your unkind critics were your own parents, let God be your affirming father. If you have been crushed by the criticism of an employer, let God be your encouraging boss. If you have been devastated by the words of criticism spoken by a husband or a wife, let God be your lover. And if you have been attacked by someone you thought was your friend, decide today that God is your very best friend.

When you are criticized, may you be helped and healed and filled by the Holy Spirit of God . . . and may you act like Jesus Christ!

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