

How to Deal with Negative People

April 11, 2016



Eleanor Roosevelt said, “Great minds discuss ideas; average minds discuss events; small minds discuss people.” And the smallest minds of all criticize people.

A small percentage of people just cannot be pleased, no matter what we do. Len Sweet wrote:

What is true in nature is true of human nature: 95 percent of the seed you plant is good, 5 percent is bad. You can trust 95 percent of the people; the other 5 percent of the people are crooks, cranks, cheaters, and crackpots. Do you live your life ruled by the 95 percent or the 5 percent?¹

The wife of a hard-to-please husband was determined to satisfy him for his just one day. “Darling,” she asked, “What would you like for breakfast this morning?” He growled, “Coffee and toast, grits and sausage, and two eggs—one scrambled and one fried.” She soon had the food on the table and waited for a word of praise. After a quick glance at his plate, he exclaimed, “Well, if you didn’t scramble the wrong egg!”

How do we deal with the criticisms of negative people?

Tune them out.

It is impossible to avoid negative, critical people completely. Jesus said to His disciples, “It is impossible but that offences will come” (Luke 17:1). It will happen, but how will we deal with it? The word “offense” (*skandalon* from which we get “scandal”) literally means “the movable stick or trigger of a trap.”

Offensive, discouraging words are a trap into which we must not fall. In many cases, it is best to practice selective hearing. Solomon said, "Take no heed unto all words that are spoken; lest thou hear thy servant curse thee" (Ecclesiastes 7:21). Solomon also counselled his son to "consent not" when sinners enticed him (Proverbs 1:10). When enticed by criticism to give up, or fight back, just tune it out and stay focused on your work.

We cannot control what people say, but we can control if we accept or reject their words. Paul warned, "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ" (Colossians 2:8). He added, "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things" (Philippians 4:8).

Overcome them.

When negative people plant negative words into your mind be mentally stronger than your critics. "Be strong" (1 Corinthians 16:13). What we say about ourselves supersedes anything anyone says about us. Solomon said, "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Proverbs 23:7). Criticism will not kill us. If criticism had any real power to harm, the skunk and the mosquito would be extinct by now. Persecution might kill us, but even that cannot touch our souls to do permanent damage (Matthew 10:28).

Overcome negative with positive.

Paul said, "Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21). Love is more powerful than hate; truth is more powerful than error; right is stronger than wrong.

Don't join the ranks of the critical to "fight fire with fire."

*I watched them tearing a building down,
A gang of men in a busy town;
With a ho-heave-ho and a lusty yell
They swung a beam, a side wall fell.*

*I asked the foreman, "Are these men skilled
As the men you'd hire if you had to build?"
He gave a laugh and said, "No indeed!
Just common labor is all I need;*

*I can easily wreck in a day or two
What builders have taken a year to do."
I thought to myself as I went my way,
Which of these roles have I tried to play?*

*Am I a builder who works with care,
Measuring life by the rule and square?
Am I shaping my deeds to a well laid plan,
Patiently doing the best I can?*

*Or am I a wrecker who walks the town
Content with the labor of tearing down?²*

Overcome shame with endurance.

Ask yourself, "Am I willing to carry the cross of criticism for Christ's sake?" (cf. Luke 9:23). Jesus is our example. The Bible says of Him, "Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2). Harry Truman, who received intense criticism during his presidency, put it this way: "If you can't stand the heat, you'd better get out of the kitchen."

Who do we want to please the most? If it is God, then we can survive whatever is thrown at us. If it is people, then we can never have success. Wait for applause, and we'll wait forever. Wait for consensus, and we'll wait forever. Wait for people's approval, and we'll wait forever.³

Peter teaches us to look at it from both perspectives:

And who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good? But and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled; but sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear: having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ (1 Peter 3:13–16).

Don't let a thoughtless remark ruin a whole day or week. Do not let it destroy peace of mind, lead to division and strife, or create scorn and vindictiveness. Deal with it properly so it does not impair normal body functions, thought processes, and performance.

Overcome worry with faith.

An average person's anxiety is focused on:

- 40%—things that will never happen.
- 30%—things about the past that cannot be changed.
- 12%—things related to criticism by others.
- 10%—health-related, which gets worse with stress.
- 8%—real problems that will be faced.⁴

That eight percent we can turn over to the Lord. Jesus said, "Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is

not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? . . . Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things" (Matthew 6:25–32).

Prove them wrong.

Use criticism for motivation. Answer critics with accomplishments. Prove criticism wrong. When a *New York Times* reporter informed Colonel William Gorgas, who was heading up the construction of the Panama Canal, of critics back home, the colonel said nothing. Eventually the reporter asked, "Aren't you going to answer your critics?"

"In time," he replied.

Time passed and finally the reporter asked, "How?"

The colonel smiled and said, "With the canal." His answer came loud and clear on August 15, 1914, when the Panama Canal opened to traffic for the first time.

Jesus said, "Nothing shall be impossible unto you" (Matthew 17:20; cf. Philippians 4:13). Critics have very often been wrong.

- An English teacher in 1894 noted "a conspicuous lack of success" on a teenager's report card. That teenager was Winston Churchill.
- A poetry editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1902 returned a stack of poems with this note: "Our magazine has no room for this vigorous verse." Robert Frost turned to others.
- In 1905 the University of Bern turned down a doctoral dissertation as "irrelevant and fanciful." Albert Einstein moved on.⁵

- As a sophomore in 1982, Michael Jordan tried out for the varsity basketball team at Laney High School in Wilmington, North Carolina, but at 5' 11", he was deemed too short to play. He channeled that rejection into becoming the greatest basketball player of his generation—perhaps of all time.

Someone said, "If you are a Christian, you can expect folks to criticize, but you ought to live so nobody will believe them." Answer criticism with deeds. Criticism can be one of the "all things" that works together for good to those who love God (Romans 8:28).

Take criticism as a compliment. One day a man met Spurgeon on the street, took off his hat, bowed, and said, "Mr. Spurgeon—a great humbug!" Spurgeon took off his hat and replied, "Thank you for the compliment. I am glad to hear that I am a great anything!"⁶

When criticized, remember you are in good company. Look at God's great preachers:

- Ahab criticized Elijah: "Art thou he that troubleth Israel?" (1 Kings 18:17).
- Ahab criticized Micaiah (1 Kings 22:8).
- Paul was criticized. The whole book of 2 Corinthians (except chapters 8–9 on stewardship) is Paul's answer to his critics (defense of his apostleship).
- Jesus was criticized. "The Son of man is come eating and drinking; and ye say, Behold a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners!" (Luke 7:34; cf. Matthew 11:18–19). He was also criticized for receiving sinners and eating with them (Luke 15:2). It is little wonder, then, that the Bible says that He was a Man of sorrows, acquainted with grief (Isaiah 53:3).

Many of the greatest modern men were also criticized. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, delivered in November 1863 at

the Civil War battlefield, is now regarded as one of the greatest speeches ever made. However, the critics of Lincoln's day did not like it:

*The nearby Harrisburg (PA) Patriot and Union wrote, "We pass over the silly remarks of the President. For the credit of the nation we are willing that the veil of oblivion shall be dropped over them and they shall no more be repeated or thought of." The Chicago Times, in Lincoln's home state, wrote, "The cheek of every American must tingle with shame as he reads the silly, flat and dishwatery utterances of the man who has to be pointed out to intelligent foreigners as the President of the United States." The London Times joined in: "The ceremony was rendered ludicrous by some of the sallies of that poor President Lincoln. Anything more dull and commonplace it would not be easy to produce."*⁷

Win them over.

Make a friend of your critic. Our critics, in a way, are our friends. A constructive criticism is a genuine compliment. The person offering it is often uncomfortable doing so, but is willing to endure discomfort to help us. He runs the risk of arousing enmity, but cares enough for our welfare to take the chance.⁸ Instead of justifying, excusing, or rationalizing an error, we should try to benefit from the criticism. This will strengthen the bond with a person who cares enough to correct in love.

Further, even a negative criticism at least says that someone noticed us. It seems the more a person climbs in achievement or maintains righteous conduct, the more disposed others are to degrade him. A football coach gave this advice on how to deal with failures. "When you're about to be run out of town, get out in front and make it look like you're heading a parade."⁹

*And so it criticized each flower,
This supercilious seed,
Until it woke one summer hour
And found itself a weed.*

One small community decided to form an orchestra. The whole town was present for the first performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The local newspaper critic was there and the brief review in the paper the next morning simply read, "Last evening, the local symphony played Beethoven. Beethoven lost."

Seek to understand why the person is critical.

Some were reared in negative environments. They received unintentional negative programming¹⁰ by constantly hearing such things as:

- "You are not smart enough to take honors classes."
- "You are not talented enough to go out for band."
- "You are not big enough to play football."
- "You come from the wrong side of the tracks to be in the honor society."
- "You will never be successful coming from this family. Everybody's against us."
- "Don't dream so big. Get your head out of the clouds."

Children growing up in average households hear "no" (or are told what they cannot do) more than 148,000 times by the time they reach age 18. A group of mothers was asked to track how many times they made negative, compared with positive, comments to their children. They found that they criticized ten times for every time they complimented.¹¹ Parents must remember that the Bible says we are to bring *up* our children both in the *nurture* and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4), and that we are not to discourage them (Colossians

3:21).

Others have been constantly put down by their peers, teachers, and bosses. They hear discouraging words all the time. A three-year survey in one city's schools found that the teachers were 75 percent negative. The same study indicated that it takes four positive statements to offset the effects of one negative statement. One small community decided to form an orchestra. The whole town was present for the first performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The local newspaper critic was there, and the brief review in the paper the next morning simply read, "Last evening, the local symphony played Beethoven. Beethoven lost."

Because of such criticisms, many people go through life doubting themselves. They see themselves as future failures. They stop chasing their dreams. David faced negativity in his youth. At every turn, it seems, people were negative.

- His father Jesse left him out of the selection process when Samuel came to anoint the next king (1 Samuel 16:11–12).
- When discussing fighting Goliath, David's oldest brother, Eliab asked, "Why camest thou down hither? and with whom hast thou left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know thy pride, and the naughtiness of thine heart; for thou art come down that thou mightest see the battle" (1 Samuel 17:28).
- King Saul spoke negative words to David: "Thou art not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him: for thou art but a youth, and he a man of war from his youth" (1 Samuel 17:33).

How did David handle it? With his brother, he simply tuned him out, turned away to someone else, and brought up the same matter (1 Samuel 17:30). With Saul, he reasoned with him and then showed what he could do. He said, "The Lord, who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the

bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine” (1 Samuel 17:37 nkjv). Your family and friends may not understand, but don’t let that stop you.

Don’t overreact to the point that a bridge is burned.

Love your enemies (Matthew 5:44). Bless when cursed. Look for an opportunity to do something good for the person. Pray for those who criticize. The Bible speaks much of pursuing the path of peace:

- “Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14).
- “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.” (Romans 12:18).
- “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others” (Philippians 2:3–4).
- “Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing” (1 Peter 3:8–9).
- “But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.” (James 3:17–18).

Let the other person win. How do we deal with someone who always has to be right or always wants his way? Jesus said, “Whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain” (Matthew 5:41). We show wisdom, not weakness, when we yield.

Abraham showed he was the bigger man when he let Lot have first pick of pastureland (Genesis 13).

See yourself as a favored child of God.

The best way to combat negative words is to know that God wants us to succeed and will help us. The devil cannot beat us (James 4:8). The psalmist said that what the godly man does will be blest (Psalm 1:1–3). That does not mean we will never have setbacks, but that ultimately we will prevail. God desires things to be well with us (Psalm 128:2). Paul wrote, “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us” (Romans 8:37). God says that we can do all things that He wants us to do (Philippians 4:13).

John wrote often of the Christian’s victorious life:

- “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth” (3 John 1:2).
- “Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world” (1 John 4:4).
- “I have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one” (1 John 2:14).

Endnotes

1. *Soul Salsa* p. 99.
2. *Congressional Record*, Vol. 148, Pt. 7, May 23, 2002 to June 12, 2002, p. 9337.
3. Leonard Sweet, *Soul Salsa*, p. 101.
4. Gregory Lund. *The Names of God*, p. 133.
5. Blaine Allen. *When People Throw Stones: A Leader’s Guide to Fielding Personal Criticism*, p. 48.

6. W. Wiersbe, *Wycliffe Handbook of Preaching & Preachers*, p. 221.
7. Stefan Lorant's, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*.
8. Rohrer, Hibler and Replogle, in "Homemade," September 1988.
9. *Bits & Pieces*, April 30, 1992.
10. Shad Helmstetter in *Homemade*, January 1987.
11. Institute of Family Relations, in *Homemade*, Vol. 10, No. 12, December. 1986.

```
[button link="" color="default" size="xlarge" stretch="" type="" shape="" target="_blank" title="" gradient_colors="|" gradient_hover_colors="|" accent_color="" accent_hover_color="" bevel_color="" border_width="1px" icon="" icon_divider="yes" icon_position="left" modal="" animation_type="bounce" animation_direction="up" animation_speed="0.7" alignment="center" class="" id=""]LEARN HOW TO SEND HTH TO YOUR COMMUNITY[/button]
```