

# How to Handle Criticism

April 18, 2016



When John Wilkes Booth's bullet ended the life of Abraham Lincoln, in the great man's pockets were found glasses, a glass cleaner, reading glasses, a glass case, a blue button with a gold letter L on it, a pocket knife, a watch fob, a Confederate five-dollar bill, and a wallet. In the wallet, there were several newspaper clippings commending Abraham Lincoln. Even a president valued words of encouragement. One can't help but wonder if he took out the articles in quiet moments to counteract the many critical articles written about him in the papers of the time.[popover title="Source" title\_bg\_color="" content="Dan Winkler, A Critical Moment (PTP)." content\_bg\_color="" bordercolor="" textcolor="" trigger="hover" placement="" class="" id=""]\*[/popover]

You will be criticized. Sir John Simon, a former British Chancellor, said, "To escape criticism, merely say nothing, do nothing, be nothing." Harrison's Postulate reads, "For every action, there is an equal and opposite criticism." There is only one way to escape it. When Ronald Reagan succeeded Edmund G. Brown as governor of California in 1967, Brown told him, "There is a passage in *War and Peace* that every new governor with a big majority should tack on his office wall. In it Count Rostov, after weeks as the toast of elegant farewell parties, gallops off on his first cavalry charge and finds real bullets snapping at his ears. 'Why, they're shooting at me,' he says. 'Me, whom everyone loves!'"[popover title="Source" title\_bg\_color="" content="Detroit Free Press." content\_bg\_color="" bordercolor="" textcolor="" trigger="hover" placement="" class="" id=""]\*[/popover]

Criticism is something all Christians experience. We should expect it. It simply is not possible to please everyone. If it were possible to please all men, then we would not please

Jesus who said, “Woe unto you when all men shall speak well of you! for so did their fathers to the false prophets” (Luke 6:26).

How should we deal with criticism?

## **Do not allow critics to cause you to give up what is good.**

James Crooks said, “If you want to lead the orchestra, you have to turn your back to the audience.” Pioneering giants in different fields have often faced the critical laughter of others:

- The first American steamboat took thirty-two hours to go from New York City to Albany. People laughed.
  - The horse and buggy passed the early motor car as if it were standing still (it usually was). People laughed.
  - The first electric light bulb was so dim that people had to use a gas lamp to see it. They laughed.
  - The first airplane came down fifty-nine seconds after it left the ground. People laughed.
- [popover title="Source" title\_bg\_color="" content="Michael P. Green, Illustrations for Biblical Preaching." content\_bg\_color="" bordercolor="" textcolor="" trigger="hover" placement="" class="" id=""]\*[/popover]

Gaius and Diotrephes, two men in the same New Testament congregation, teach us a lesson about criticism. Diotrephes did not show hospitality to traveling preachers who needed help, and he forbade others to do so. He also berated those who differed from him, even with “malicious words” (3 John 1:10), and casting some out of the church for it. Yet Gaius was courageous and gracious enough to accept missionaries anyway. Imagine a missionary coming by Gaius’ house on Thursday needing a place to stay. Gaius would say “yes,” even though he knew he would get chewed out about it on Sunday. He

refused to be intimidated by Diotrefes. Fearing God rather than men (cf. Acts 5:29), Gaius did not allow criticism to prevent him from doing good works.

David temporarily fled his throne in Absalom's coup (2 Samuel 15–16), but he returned as soon as it was safe. Even though he was emotionally grieving his loss, and many had “cast their vote” against him by following Absalom, he took his place before the people (2 Samuel 19:1–8).

Nehemiah avoided a common mistake associated with criticism. He did not allow his enemies to become the focus of his attention. When Sanballat mocked the “feeble Jews” (Nehemiah 4:1–2), and Tobiah ventured that if a fox ran along the wall the Jews were building it would fall (4:3), Nehemiah kept his attention on wall-building: “So built we the wall . . .” (4:6); “nevertheless” (4:9); “therefore” (4:13). He assigned some men to defensive positions; others held swords in one hand and tools in the other, and he kept the wall going up (4:17–18). Despite their enemies, they built the wall in only fifty-two days (6:15).

Without realizing it, we can shift attention away from important work at hand and waste time, thought, and energy by becoming critic-centered. Lincoln said, “If I tried to read, much less answer, all the criticism made of me, this office would be closed for a lack of other business. I am doing the best I can.”

We should not try to answer questions for people who really are not interested in answers. Solomon wrote, “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him” (Proverbs 26:4). Wayne Jackson said, “The train does not slow down when a stray dog barks at it.” We could spend all our time putting out fires and let the fire go out in our own hearts. Wendell Winkler trained preachers for a quarter century. Late in his life, he said that he believed more preachers quit due to criticism than anything else. Many

elders and deacons likewise resign because of criticism. Many, many other good works have ceased because a Diotrophes, Sanballat, or Absalom criticized a good work.

Persistence is the ultimate test of leadership. How does one reach "oak tree" stature? An oak tree is just a little nut that refused to give its ground. Outlast the critics.

A minister was constantly harassed by a village wiseacre who knew everything and kept heckling the minister endlessly. The preacher was quiet, unassuming, and remarkably patient. The heckler often challenged statements the minister made in sermons, but by doing so, he displayed conceit, arrogance, and ignorance to the other listeners. One night several members asked the minister why he did not defend himself and put the pest in his place. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, smiled, and explained, "Well, in the little village where I grew up there was a fellow that had a big-mouthed hound. This hound had the habit of going out at night and barking at the moon." The minister said no more. Finally, a member asked, "Well, what about the hound and the moon?" "Oh," laughed the minister, "I think if you will look, the moon is still shining."

## **See criticism as an opportunity to improve.**

Imagine the U.S. political system if citizens were forbidden to criticize public officials as they are in totalitarian regimes. Dictators isolate themselves in enormous power and forbid criticism and freedom of the press. Is this preferable to a free democratic republic? Hardly. Criticism often helps politicians do the right thing.

Mignon McLaughlin (1913-83) said, "Most of us would rather be ruined by praise than helped by criticism." The world's smiles are more dangerous than its frowns. Leon Leonwood Bean, who

founded L.L. Bean stores in 1912, used the formula 25 to 1. He believed there are 25 complaints about us for every one that we hear. Multiply every criticism you hear by about 25.

Criticism is a vehicle for self-evaluation and improvement. J. C. Penney wrote a book entitled *What an Executive Should Know about Himself*. In it he asked: "Can you take criticism?" Then he quoted Chicago department store magnate Marshall Field:

Those who enter to buy, support me.

Those who come to flatter, please me.

Those who complain, teach me how I may please others so that more will come.

Only those hurt me who are displeased but do not complain.

They refuse me permission to correct my errors and thus improve my service.

Penney then underlined the importance of criticism by saying: "Praise is a wonderful 'pick-me-up,' but it is only through criticism that we are enabled to know what we have been doing wrong and thereby correct our failures and shortcomings." Stephen Neill put it more bluntly when he said, "Criticism is the manure in which the Lord's servants grow best." We cannot afford to dismiss a criticism without considering it for only a fool does not try to profit when rebuked for a mistake.

Solomon wrote often of the benefits of criticism:

- "He that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul: but he that heareth reproof getteth understanding" (Proverbs 15:32).
- "Hear instruction, and be wise, and refuse it not" (Proverbs 8:33).
- "Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness" (Psalm 141:5).
- "Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful" (Proverbs 27:6).

By this definition, faithful friends are few. (How many of

your friends are comfortable giving you constructive criticism?) If we need to make a change, we should not let the fact that a critic pointed it out to us stop us. When Abraham Lincoln was told that Edwin M. Stanton, his Secretary of War, had called him a fool, he paused and said, "Stanton is a wise man. If he said I am a fool, then I had better look into the matter."

Adlai Stevenson II observed, "Criticism is simply the method by which existing ideas and institutions are submitted to the test of principles, ideals, and possibilities." When General Dwight D. Eisenhower was about to implement a battle plan, he would take it to his critics. Someone asked him why he wasted time showing his plans to critics instead of taking them to his advisors. He answered, "Because my critics help me find the weaknesses in the plan so I can correct them." [popover title="Source" title\_bg\_color="" content="Kent Crockett, The 911 Handbook, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003, 104" content\_bg\_color="" bordercolor="" textcolor="" trigger="hover" placement="" class="" id=""]\*[/popover]

No one is perfect (Romans 3:23; 6:23) so everyone has the potential to benefit from criticism. One man said, candidly, "Most of the unfortunate things of my life were caused by one person: me." God gives the freedom to make choices (Joshua 24:15), but once we make a choice, we are never free from the consequences of that choice.

There are three kinds of people: accusers, excusers, and choosers.

- Accusers say, "It's your fault." When Adam sinned he took it like a man—he blamed his wife. "Eve did it," and then he blamed God, "You gave me that woman."
- Excusers say, "I'm a product of my environment. It's not really my fault."
- Choosers accept responsibility for their decisions. When Bear Bryant was pushed to explain his philosophy of

coaching, he said: “There’s just three things I ever say to my players: ‘If anything goes bad, then I did it. If anything goes semi-good, then we did it. If anything goes real good, then you did it.’ That’s all it takes to get people to win football games for you.”[popover title="Source" title\_bg\_color="" content="Michael P. Green, Illustrations for Biblical Preaching" content\_bg\_color="" bordercolor="" textcolor="" trigger="hover" placement="" class="" id=""]\*[/popover]

Milton Burl was asked, “How in the world are you out where someone could end up in an early graveyard, where you have all these entertaining critics ... how in world have you managed to be loved by everybody like you have been?”

He said, “I learned real young that when somebody comes up and criticizes me I always hesitate for a moment and then say, ‘You know, you are probably right about that’ and then I go on my way.”

## **Never give criticism more power than it deserves.**

It is unreasonable to think we can please everybody. “When you trim yourself to fit everybody, you’ll finally whittle yourself away.” James A. Harding, of whom Harding University is named, once said of criticism, “I don’t mind being swallowed by a whale, but I refuse to be nibbled to death by minnows.”

Paul wrote, “But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man’s judgment: yea, I judge not mine own self. For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord” (1 Corinthians 4:3-4).

The Lord called Job a “perfect and upright, and one that

feared God and escheweth evil" (Job 1:1) but his friends said he:

- was a hypocrite (Job 5:4-5),
- was just getting what he deserved (Job 5:8-15),
- had a bad attitude (Job 5:17), and,
- was a windbag (Job 8:2).

Jude said that murmurers and complainers walk according to their own lust (Jude 1:16), which indicates that criticism is often selfish and shows a lack of love. "As compassion decreases, criticism increases. As compassion increases, criticism decreases." [popover title="Source" title\_bg\_color="" content="Kent Crockett, I Once Was Blind But Now I Squint, Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2004, 113" content\_bg\_color="" bordercolor="" textcolor="" trigger="hover" placement="" class="" id=""]\*[/popover] Lincoln said, "He has the right to criticize who has the heart to help." Peter wrote, "And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).

The preacher of a small church had a critic in his congregation. On the day of the annual church picnic, it occurred to him that no one called and personally invited her to attend, so he called her. When she answered, he confessed the oversight and said that he really hoped she would still attend. She replied, "It's too late to say you are sorry. I have already prayed for rain!"

Jesus was criticized by the religious leaders for not having the education they had (John 7:15). When what He taught convicted them of error, they attacked His mother's morals, saying, "We were not born of fornication" (John 8:41), with the implication that He was. He was mocked even during His trials and crucifixion (Luke 22:63-65; 23:11, 36, 39; Hebrews 12:3). Jesus did not let those criticisms turn Him from His mission.



Why should a small number of enemies be allowed to determine our happiness? Often we will have only one or two critics but hundreds of supporters. We should at least give our supporters equal time with our naysayers. Mark Twain once said, "I can live for two months on a good compliment!" Good news from a "far country" can fill a need (cf. Proverbs 25:25). These still believe in us and appreciate our efforts. David's loyal bodyguards and friends had not abandoned him. Winston Churchill had the following words of Abe Lincoln framed on the wall of his office: "I do the best I know how, the very best I can. I mean to keep on doing this, down to the very end. If the end brings me out all wrong, then ten angels swearing I had been right would make no difference. If the end brings me out all right, then what is said against me now will not amount to anything." [popover title="Source" title\_bg\_color="" content="Bits & Pieces, April 29, 1993, pp. 15-16." content\_bg\_color="" bordercolor="" textcolor="" trigger="hover" placement="" class="" id=""]\*[/popover]

## **Be humble.**

It is hard to offend a humble man. Ego is what gets most people in trouble. Jeremiah said, "Thus saith the Lord, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches" (Jeremiah 9:23). Never be afraid to say, "I'm wrong" or "I need to improve on that. Thank you for that." A man who refuses to admit his mistakes can never be successful, but most people will give us another chance if we react humbly to correction. Solomon said, "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy" (Proverbs 28:13). "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes," and his "wrath is presently known" (Proverbs 12:15-16). David proved to be a wise man by showing restraint in bearing Shimei's curses (2 Samuel 16:1-16) and using them to foster humility.

If we want to grow from the criticism we encounter, we must face up to it on at least four different levels:

- **Spiritual.** Be willing to learn afresh that you are not infallible. Paul wrote, “For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith” (Romans 12:3). We all need God’s grace and wisdom every moment. Remember, “God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble” (James 4:6). Jesus said, “Whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (Luke 14:11). We are all great sinners, so whoever criticizes us likely does not know the worst things about us. George Whitefield once received a vicious letter accusing him of wrongdoing. He replied, “I thank you heartily for your letter. As for what you and my other enemies are saying against me, I know worse things about myself than you will ever say about me. With love in Christ, George Whitfield.”  
[popover title="Source" title\_bg\_color="" content="Daily Bread, August 18, 1992." content\_bg\_color="" bordercolor="" textcolor="" trigger="hover" placement="" class="" id=""]\*[/popover]
- **Emotional.** We must force ourselves to be dispassionate. That is hard to do, but it can be done. Solomon counselled, “A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger” (Proverbs 15:1). “Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few” (Ecclesiastes 5:2). Paul said, “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves” (Philippians 2:3). Proverbs 26:4 advises that there is a time to walk away and avoid a wrong response that would

only disgrace you. If we answer a fool according to his folly, we are like him. We cannot sling mud without getting our own hands dirty. We cannot get into a shouting match without appearing to be as unintelligent as the one shouting back at us.

- **Rational.** Take up the criticism and examine it objectively. *Consider the source.* Is it constructive criticism from someone who loves us or an attack from someone who wants to hurt us? (Proverbs 27:6). As someone has said, "We learn much from the disagreeable things people say of us, for they make us think, whereas the good things only make us glad." When criticized, Paul took a step back and objectively weighed the criticism against him. When his objectors said that his letters were "weighty and powerful; but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible" (2 Corinthians 10:10), he thought about it. His attitude in such things was: "Why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience?" (1 Corinthians 10:29). Do our critics have a point? Are they being fair? Perhaps they are; perhaps they are not. "When I do wrong, I hear it ever; when I do well, I hear it never."
- **Practical.** Try to help your critic. The Bible says we are to return good for evil. Kindness is stronger than malice. Paul wrote, "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:19–21). We should first ask ourselves if there is any truth to the criticism.

A philosopher stated that it is our enemies and not our friends who bring out the best in us. Our enemies may sometimes be bold enough to say to us what our friends only

think to themselves.