



Criticism: Receiving It

All of us need to be sensitive and open to criticism. None of us is above criticism. We should be willing to receive the criticism of others. We have much to learn and can profit immeasurably from the loving criticism of friends in Christ. Previously we discussed giving criticism. In this article we want to focus on receiving criticism.

The Bible has much to say about receiving criticism, especially in the form of correction and reproof. Solomon speaks of the importance of this in many places in the Book of Proverbs. The people of God must be open to criticism.

In Proverbs 13:18 he says that

" . . . he that regardeth reproof shall be honored." And again in Proverbs 15:5, ". . . he that regardeth reproof is prudent."

Time and again Solomon warns against the folly of refusing to accept legitimate criticism. He writes in Proverbs 10:17,

"He is in the way of life that keepeth instruction: but he that refuseth reproof erreth."

In Proverbs 12:1 he says,

"Whoso loveth instruction loveth knowledge: but he that hateth reproof is brutish."

In Proverbs 15:10 we read,

"Correction is grievous unto him that forsaketh the way: and he that hateth reproof shall die."

And in Proverbs 15:31, 32 we are told,

"The ear that heareth the reproof of life abideth among the wise. He that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul: but he that heareth reproof getteth understanding."

We must be open to criticism. It is the fool that refuses to accept any criticism.

It is not our nature, however, to receive criticism. Most often, rather than to hear our critic out, we reject him and his criticism out of hand. We don't even give him a hearing, but cut him short for daring to take it upon himself to criticize us. We resent the criticism, and often strike back at the one who brings the criticism. Strangely enough, it is often the case that those who are the most outspoken negative critics of others have little capacity to receive criticism themselves. Immediately they are defensive, giving excuses and involved explanations, or simply curtly reject the criticism of others without giving it any honest consideration whatsoever.

This is simply pride! It is a proud man who cannot take criticism from his fellow church member. It is a proud husband who cannot take criticism from his wife. It is a proud Christian school teacher who cannot take criticism from a school board member or concerned parent. It is a proud minister who cannot take criticism from his fellow officebearers or from a concerned member of the congregation.

If we are going to take criticism, we must be humble. That humility is the humility that recognizes that we all have weaknesses and sins. None of us is perfect. And as long as we have these weaknesses and sins, as long as we are not perfect, we are open to constructive criticism.

We ought to ask ourselves this question: Am I humble enough to take criticism? Am I humble enough to take the criticism of my wife, or of a loving fellow church member? Are we Christian school teachers humble enough to take the criticism of colleagues or concerned parents? Are we ministers humble enough to take the criticism of those who are genuinely interested in our welfare and effectiveness in the ministry? Are we as churches humble enough to take the criticism of others?

There has only ever been one man who was above criticism, who had no weaknesses, no faults, no sin: that was our Lord Jesus Christ. As long as you and I are in this life, we will have a need of and should therefore be open to criticism.

In fact, this is why God has given us a wife or a husband. This is why God has given us our colleagues, our fellow church members, our fellow officebearers. He has placed these people alongside of us for our constructive criticism. They are there to admonish us, to reprove us for weaknesses and sins, to correct us when we err.

If we are going to take the criticism of others, we are going to have to follow certain basic steps.

- First, hear your critic out. Let him finish his criticism. Don't interrupt him. Don't cut him short. Indicate that you are sincerely interested in hearing everything that might be on his mind concerning your shortcomings or whatever he feels makes you worthy of criticism.
- Secondly, be clear on the evidence upon which the criticism is based. What are the grounds for the criticism? What is there to support the criticism and to indicate that the criticism is valid criticism? Attempt to understand the reason for the criticism.
- Thirdly, be sure you understand the real point of the criticism. It is possible that the expressed criticism doesn't deal with the real problem, but only with a symptom of the problem or a surface issue connected to a much deeper underlying problem. Help the critic himself to understand clearly the focus of his criticism.
- In the fourth place, discuss with your critic the best means to correct the wrong, make amends for the error and prevent its happening again in the future, strengthen the weakness. How best can this problem be overcome so that it does not become an even bigger problem?
- In the fifth place, assure your critic that you will give serious and honest consideration to his criticism. You will evaluate his criticism. You will discuss it with others. You will bring the matter to God in prayer.

It may very well be the case that after you evaluate the criticism, you come to the conclusion that your critic is right. His criticism is a valid criticism. The wrong or weakness is a definite area in your life or work where you have fallen short, and where there is a need for improvement. Pray for God's grace to make this kind of honest evaluation of yourself. And pray for God's grace to implement corrective measures in light of the criticism.

It may also be the case that, after honest, prayerful consideration of a certain criticism, we come to the conclusion that the criticism is not a valid criticism, that we do not deserve the criticism, that there are no proper grounds on which the criticism is based. That we must be open to criticism doesn't mean that we must accept ALL criticism. That we must receive valid criticism doesn't mean that we must bend to EVERY critic. If we believe before God and in our own conscience that we

have done right, if we believe that our position is the right position, we must stand. We must be strong enough to reject wrong and invalid criticism.

Even then, we must do this in the right way. We ought to tell our critic that we do not accept his criticism. We ought to tell him the reasons why we do not accept his criticism. And we should do what we can to make him understand our position. He may still not agree with you; you may have to part with a definite difference of opinion. Then you must leave the matter to the Lord and to His judgment.

Constructive criticism is healthy. Often it is the case that we are just too involved with ourselves and too biased about ourselves to make honest judgments about ourselves and our behavior. It's extremely difficult to be as objective and penetrating as we ought to be in self-examination. We need the loving criticism of others.

The proper giving and taking of criticism serves a good function in the body of Jesus Christ. As much as evil criticism can tear down the unity of the church, valid, constructive criticism can serve as an effective means to build up the unity of the church. God has called us to unity. By properly giving and taking criticism, we express our unity before God and reveal our unity before men.

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