

Growing through *Criticism*

Most Christians I know serve the Lord and others with genuine and sincere hearts. We give our best. Perhaps that is why some types of complaints or criticism can hit us so hard. We can rapidly feel misunderstood, undervalued or rejected. Our natural reaction is to defend ourselves, to find inaccuracies in the criticism or weaknesses in the life of the one who criticizes. If not careful, we can become angry or self-pitying loners. Or we may stop doing a God-given assignment. Or we may become bitter, aggressive and un-Christlike! How did you respond the last time you were criticized? There are different reasons that prompt people to criticize. Consider the following Biblical examples.

What others criticize

Authority: Moses and Aaron were busy doing what God called them to do. Then a group of men, led by Korah, criticized their leadership. "You have gone too far!" they complained. Some people have a problem with all forms of authority. How did Moses react? "When Moses heard this, he fell face down" (Num 16:1-4). He took the criticism into the Lord's presence.

Goals and convictions: The apostle Paul was a devoted and busy servant of God. Yet many disagreed with his God-given theological insights. Some of these convictions clashed with those of other God-fearing men and women. But Paul remained faithful and passionate: "I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus." Then he gave the following important insight: "All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you *think differently*, that too *God will make clear to you*. Only let us live up to what we have already attained." (Phil 3:14-16). In His time, God Himself will make His truth clear. Only He can change strong opinions and deep convictions.

Motives: When David expressed his indignation at how Goliath was insulting the armies of the living God, David's brothers criticized him! "I know how conceited you are and how wicked your heart is" said his oldest brother (1 Sam 17:28). It must have hurt! But David does not allow such criticism to paralyze him. A criticism may provide the needed incentive to examine our motives. Use it! Often our motives are mixed. We can ask God to purify our hearts. "He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God" (1 Cor 4:5). Correct motivation is important.

Customs: Sometimes it is not *what* we do but *how* we do it that generates discomfort and criticism. Our service or money may be rejected because of *the way* we serve or give. The apostle Paul, an experienced traveler, was very aware of the need for cultural sensitivity. He even asked for prayer "that my service

in Jerusalem *may be acceptable* to the saints there" (Rom 15:31). When it comes to ways of doing things and neutral matters concerning culture and traditions, Paul recommends selfless adaptability, "because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification" (Rom 14:17-22).

Accepting criticism

The purpose of *constructive* criticism is to help you or the common cause. The purpose of *destructive* criticism is to hurt, reduce, replace or eliminate you. Some people feel attacked by all forms of criticism. They reject or ignore their critics. Knowing that Godly criticism is always of the constructive type, some choose only accept criticism if they are convinced that is constructive. My observation is that nearly *all* criticism, constructive or otherwise, will contain some element of useful truth. Not all mirrors are straight and clean, but he who rejects criticisms is like one who breaks mirrors. Winston Churchill was right when he said: "Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfills the same function as pain in the human body. It calls attention to an unhealthy state of things."

Listening to God

Next time you receive a serious complaint or any kind of criticism, resist the temptation to dismiss, respond or counter attack. Take the criticism into the Lord's presence. Lay it before Him. Ask the Lord to reveal to you the element of truth within the complaint that you need to hear. Once discovered, you may throw away the rest of the criticism. If you can find and accept that painful truth buried within the criticism, you will grow by it. In doing so, you will allow the criticism to develop you rather than discourage you. By allowing God to speak to us through our critics, we shall receive insights to help us become more like the Lord Jesus, to better understand God's word, or guidance as to a necessary change in *what* we do – or the *way* we currently do it.

Believing God

When critics conflict with God's word, don't let them shake you. Believe God. Whatever others may say, you are a loved and valuable child of God. Whatever others may say, "Your labour in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor 15:58). Others may despise, reject, discredit or forget what you have done, but "God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them" (Heb 6:10).

The old Greek philosopher Aristotle used to say: "Criticism is something we can avoid easily by saying nothing, doing nothing, and being nothing." For the Christian these are not options. Determine to welcome the next criticism that comes your way. Then choose to use it and grow through it.