

"Conquering Criticism"

A legend is told about a group of tiny frogs who held a competition to see who could reach the top of a very high tower. A huge crowd had gathered to see the race and cheer on the contestants. As the race began, no one in the crowd really believed that the tiny frogs could reach the top of the tower. Some said, "They will never make it to the top," and others said, "There is not a chance they will succeed." One by one, the tiny frogs began collapsing. But, there were a few brave souls that kept climbing higher. The crowd continued to yell louder, "It is too difficult! The tower is too high and no one will make it!" More tiny frogs grew tired and just gave up the effort. However, there was one frog that continued to climb higher and higher. He simply would not give up, and after a big effort, he became the only frog that was able to reach the top. With great excitement, all of the other frogs wanted to know how this one frog managed to succeed when all the others had failed. A contestant asked the tiny frog how he had found the strength and determination to succeed in reaching the goal. As it turned out, the successful frog was deaf!

There are few things in our life journey that are as painful and paralyzing as facing the sting of criticism. We find the wounds of criticism go so deeply because our hearts take it so personally. But, even the mere threat of criticism has left many a life in underachieving mediocrity. American author Elbert Hubbard wrote, "To avoid criticism, say nothing, do nothing, be nothing." However, anything that is ever worth accomplishing for God will come with its fair-share of criticism. When you study the lives of those who undertook great tasks for God, you quickly discover they wore more mud than medals! Perhaps no one, outside of Christ, ever faced the depth of criticism that Moses was forced to endure. In Exodus 15:24, you find a phrase that was used time and again, "And the people murmured against Moses..." There was nothing he could ever do that pleased the people. Yet, in the presence of God he found the only opinion that really mattered. When a man lives only to please God, he knows that while his critics may know some things, God knows all the rest! Living with a critical appraisal is difficult on our ego, but those who learn to conquer it seem to walk on a higher spiritual plateau with God. How can a man navigate his way through the mine field of criticism and successfully obtain vindication and victory over his critics?

In order to conquer criticism we must **listen with a discerning ear**. Although Moses faced constant criticism, he was often startled and surprised from where the criticism came. In Numbers 16, it came from three men "...famous in the congregation, men of renown." But, in Numbers 12, "...Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses..." His criticism came from those who were respected, but also from those who were relatives. The great lesson here is just because someone is close to us does not guarantee they are close to God! When we listen to criticism from those we have trusted with influence in our life it is easy to allow their selfish interests to overshadow our spiritual instincts. There is a great question to ask ourselves when trying to discern the legitimacy of criticism; "Does the criticism embrace the will of God or exclude the will of God?" A heart persuaded of God's will can never be dissuaded of it by criticism. Long before Noah heard the ridicule of the crowd, God had told him the rain was coming. Long before Nehemiah saw the winks of disbelief, God had showed him a wall of defense. German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote, "Against criticism a man can neither protest nor defend himself; he must act in spite of it, and then it will gradually yield to him." When God is directing the ship of a man's life, the waves of His calling are always mightier than the winds of criticism.

In order to conquer criticism we must **learn from a dependable example**. In Exodus 18, Jethro watched as Moses grew weary under the weight of well doing. Jethro then spoke a seasonable word of criticism, "...The thing that thou doest is not good. Thou wilt surely wear away..." Moses was well on his way to becoming an ineffective leader, and Jethro gave a stern but gracious warning. The acid test of constructive criticism is the fact it only has as its aim to correct and never to condemn. We should never fear criticism when we are right, but we should never ignore it when we are wrong. Esther was determined to play it safe, but Mordecai's gentle rebuke gave her determination to do what was right. Martha was so busy performing, but a loving rebuke from Jesus helped to balance her priorities. Apollos was a talented young preacher, but was limited in his knowledge. Aquila and Priscilla graciously took him aside "...and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly." A.W. Tozer once said, "Never be afraid of honest criticism. If the critic is wrong, you can help him; and if you're wrong, he can help you. Either way, somebody's helped."

Any time criticism drives us to the heart of God, you can rest assured it was both noble and necessary for our life.

In order to conquer criticism we must **limit all the damaging effects**. After years of handling the criticism so well, in Numbers 20, we find a breaking point in the life of Moses. Once again, the people were thirsty and criticized Moses' leadership. In a moment of frustration and weariness, Moses strikes the rock twice to get water rather than speak to it as God commanded. The contagious nature of criticism had spread to unbelief and disobedience in Moses. The longer we allow the words of a critic to linger in our minds, the greater the chance exists of developing a cynical and critical spirit our self. A wounded man is just as dangerous to himself as he is to others. As Elijah pondered Jezebel's threats, the more cowardly and skeptical he became. As John the Baptist pondered Herod's threats, the more discouraged and doubtful he became. Adrian Rogers once said, "It is as much a Christian's duty to avoid taking offense as it is to avoid giving offense." When verbal javelins are hurled in our direction, the decision then becomes ours as to whether or not we return the javelin. It is worth remembering that in a single decision a man can quickly move from the critical to the hypocritical.

My grandmother always seemed to have a kennel of dogs when I was growing up. Every time we went to her house, it seemed one dog would start barking and it set the entire kennel to barking. Most of the dogs were dumb as to why or even at what they were barking. However, if you just ignored them and did not give them something else to bark about, they stopped barking and went back inside their dog house. Therein lies a great secret in dealing with criticism. The sooner you turn a deaf ear and stop giving them something to bark about, the sooner the dumb dogs will shut up and go back home!

Your Most Proud Pastor,
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