

Criticism and the Christian 7-30-17

Proverbs 9

The school teacher, Mrs. Clemwiddle, called for a meeting after school with two of her students, Jason and Tyler. When they arrived she sat them down, looked squarely at them and said, “Boys, I’ve gotta tell you that your work is reflecting laziness. It is sloppy, late, and careless. I am failing you both for this term, and if you don’t get on the stick and raise your grades you won’t be graduating.” Jason left that meeting and turned his academic life around. He hit the books, did extra work, and eventually graduated first in his class from medical school. On the day of his graduation he gave a speech honoring his former teacher, Mrs. Clemwiddle. Tyler? Tyler just got angry, and spent his remaining months in school complaining about his mean teacher until he was expelled.

What is behind the difference between Jason and Tyler? These two young men are described for us in the book of Proverbs. 9:**7-9** *He who corrects a scoffer gets dishonor for himself, and he who reproves a wicked man gets insults for himself. ⁸Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you, reprove a wise man and he will love you. ⁹Give instruction to a wise man and he will be still wiser, teach a righteous man and he will increase his learning.* In this passage Jason is called a wise man, a righteous man. Tyler is called a scoffer, a wicked man. And the difference between the two is seen in how they respond to criticism. Other proverbs show us the same thing. Proverbs 12:**1** *Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid.* 13:**1** *A wise son accepts his father's discipline, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke.* 15:**5** *A fool rejects his father's discipline, but he who regards reproof is sensible.* There are other words for criticism. Reproof, correction, rebuke, admonition. The word we use most though is “criticism” and so my title today is criticism and the Christian. And I really believe this is for us a critical topic – pun surely intended.

I want you to see first a critical difference. The diverse responses of our two boys, Jason and Tyler, reveal distinct and contrasting attitudes of heart, that lead people in totally opposite life directions. What inspires one to great achievement can provoke another to crime. And so much of it has to do with how one responds to criticism. And all of us have, and do face criticism – from our spouses, our parents, our children, our siblings, our bosses, our employees, our friends and our enemies. For some criticism becomes a bridge to responsible living and success. For others it is a stimulant to hostility or depression. You see, criticism, in itself, as we encounter it, is not necessarily harmful or helpful. What it becomes depends on the heart condition of the person who encounters it. Some despise it. Some absolutely hate to be criticized. You saw Proverbs 9:**8a** *Do not reprove a*

scoffer, or he will hate you. There are a lot of people who would rather you punch them than suggest that they did something wrong. And this is not just a matter of temperament. God says it is a key difference between the foolish and the wise. In fact, Proverbs 12:1 *Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid.* Proverb 15:10 *Grievous punishment is for him who forsakes the way; he who hates reproof will die.* You think God may be wanting to get your attention young people, older people, in these stiff warnings about the rejection of reproof?

Then too the Lord speaks with tremendous commendation of those who value correction. Proverbs 6:23 *The commandment is a lamp and the teaching is light; and reproofs for discipline are the way of life.* We see clearly that our subject for today is a matter of life and death isn't it? This is huge. Proverbs 13:18 *Poverty and shame will come to him who neglects discipline, but he who regards reproof will be honored.* 15:5 *A fool rejects his father's discipline, but he who regards reproof is sensible.* 31 *He whose ear listens to the life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise.* This doesn't say that the wise man enjoys reproof does it? Nobody enjoys criticism. The difference here is not a matter of taste – one likes it, another doesn't. No, no. It is a difference in values. One values reproof. Remember Proverbs 9:8? *Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you, reprove a wise man and he will love you.* Wisdom teaches us to value certain things that aren't pleasant – like our alarm clocks and our vaccinations and our dental visits and exercise. When you see the long-term value of certain things you even get to where you welcome them. You develop the attitude of the psalmist who wrote this in Psalm 141:5 *Let the righteous smite me in kindness and reprove me; it is oil upon the head.* Man that is a far cry from the attitude of the fool isn't it? It is also not something we are born into. What explains the difference between the man who welcomes reproof and the man who hates it?

We look at that question now, under heading two, which is “contrasting desires.” You see, the person who values reproof and the person who despises it possess two very different life goals. The man who values reproof or criticism does so because he wants to be righteous. He wants to do well, to be good. And he knows that criticism may very well assist him in becoming a better man. It certainly can't keep him from that can it? So, from the perspective of someone wanting to be righteous, criticism is a positive value. It will help you reach your goal. But what about the other guy, the Tylers, the fools, who despise reproof. What is their goal? Their goal is not to be righteous, not to be good. It is to *feel* righteous and to *feel* good. And when you are criticized how does it make you feel? Not good and not righteous. In fact, it makes you feel bad. And if feeling good is your goal

then criticism becomes an enemy. You see that? This all hit home for me a number of years back when my wife and I went to West Florida to visit her family. I had figured out, by then, that when we went to see Beth's family I needed to really put some guards on my behavior. I had a history of disrupting our marital tranquility while visiting the in-laws. So, this time I was determined to do better, and I thought I had succeeded. I was so confident that on our way home I looked at Beth and asked, "How did I do this weekend?" She got this pained expression and proceeded to share feelings about my conduct. As I listened, I just sat there stunned and crushed and wishing the earth would just open up and swallow me. I was so discouraged. But, in my silence, I got to wondering – why did I find her reaction so disheartening, so discouraging? Her words had not injured my body, my bank account or my reputation. Why was I struggling? The answer? I wanted to feel righteous more than I wanted to be righteous. When I saw that, I was able to repent of it, and move on to learn from the rebuke.

Let's face it folks. Criticism does hurt. It brings real emotional pain. If ten people walk out of here today and praise my sermon, and one guy speaks critically, guess which will have the greater impact on my spirit? I don't expect we will ever get over that completely. I do want to feel righteous. I want to feel good about myself. Criticism will disrupt those good feelings. The criticisms of those close to me can disrupt them even more. But if I truly value **being** righteous and **being** good more than I value **feeling** those things then I will not retaliate against or run away from criticism, because I know that it will help me reach the more important of my goals. So, the difference between the Jasons and the Tylers, the wise and the foolish is that the former want to be good, the latter only want to feel good. You must decide which of those matters most to you.

Now, I am heading toward a very practical discussion of how to respond properly to criticism. But I know that how-tos will never do us good if the basic foundation for responding wisely is not already in place. So, before the how-tos let's cover the key to handling criticism. That key is a personal relationship with God. A personal relationship with God in which, and by which you discover truly who you are. Psychologists tell us that our understanding of ourselves comes largely from our interaction with others, especially the significant others in our lives. This begins with parents who communicate a great deal about our basic worth. But, so many others also become mirrors by which we get a sense of who we are. Am I ugly or pretty, smart or dull, fun or boring, good or bad, treasure or trash? How do you answer those questions? You take cues from those around you. This is why many of us like having dogs. What do your dogs reflect back to you? They

jump up and down when you come home, they wag their tails and lick your face and say, “you are awesome!” That’s why one guy prayed every day, “Lord, help me to be the person Max thinks I am.” But you can’t really develop a substantive understanding of yourself from your dog. For one thing your cat will contradict it. But neither can you develop it from other people. People will send a variety of messages your way. Some accurate. Some not. If you live for human approval you are going to have a difficult life, and **criticism will be devastating**. The key to stability, in the face of criticism or praise, is having a significant other in your life who is unchanging and perfect, and whose word is unassailable. You see, when torrents of accusations are hurled my way, I can look to my Lord and to His word to discern if they are lies or if they are truth. If they speak truly about me or falsely. And I can truly be open to the possibility that they are partly on target because even if they are, the gospel tells me I am forgiven and I am loved. If you have no understanding of what God thinks of you, if you have no relationship with a heavenly father who loves you wildly without condition, then you are liable to be tossed about and jerked around by the changing messages you get from people.

Have you ever stopped to ask yourself why you care so much about what people think of you? Why it matters what that woman across the aisle says? It matters so much to you, partly, because you are not getting your self-concept, your sense of worth, from God. And so you are looking for it from others. You are letting your boss or your neighbor or your ex-husband define who you are, instead of letting God. I know I do that, but it is a huge mistake. I Corinthians 4:**1-3** *Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. ²In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. ³But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself.* Let me tell you, this is a place I long to be. A place where I can say, “it is a **very** small thing that I should be examined, judged, critiqued by you or by any human court.” Paul says it. What is going on in his soul that isn’t going on in most of us? Read on **4** *For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord.* Do you get it? He has a relationship with God that eclipses all others. He began the chapter saying that he is a servant of God and a servant answers to only one master. If he is found guilty or worthy by a human court that means nothing. If he is found guilty or worthy by God that means everything. Paul calls us too, to live our lives in the light of divine judgment, not human judgment. **5** *Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and*

disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God. This great perspective will enable you to deal with criticism or with praise. If it comes from humans then it is a very small thing compared to the judgment of God. But, without this heavenly viewpoint, without a relationship to God, being examined by others is huge because that determines what I think of me and it makes it very hard to calmly endure criticism. In the New Testament we get these wonderful insights into the gospel psychology of the apostle Paul. In I Thessalonians 2:4 *But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts.* Boy, there is a lot there. He says, “My goal isn’t to please men, so if men aren’t pleased, no big deal.” But then he goes on to refer to God who examines the heart. God knows your motive. God really knows the quality of what you are doing. And we are wise to continually remind ourselves that we stand accountable before Him and no one else. Only then will we not be tripped up by the disapproval of men. Can you say with Paul, *“I don’t answer to men. I have one Master who sits in the heavens. He alone is Lord of my conscience?”*

So, with that understanding, that a genuine personal relationship with God is essential, we move on to look at our ten ways to respond to criticism. You ready?

#1 Listen carefully. Really seek to understand what the critic is communicating. There is a temptation to just shut down when you identify incoming words as criticism. You sort of pull in to a communication shell. But, if you have a refuge in God you don’t need that shell. You are free to listen, and to understand. Part of listening carefully is to insure that you got the message straight. Sometimes, when we hear something that sounds critical we just want to get away. Hang in there instead and clarify that you got it. You know, my family now lives very close to a fine Scottish restaurant. I like Scottish food because it is so inexpensive. And when I go in there to order a Quarter Pounder and fries, the lady behind the counter repeats my order back to me. Why does she do that? To make sure she got it. Do the same in your critical conversations. Listen carefully.

The second thing to do when criticized is to accept the pain as part of God’s discipline. Until you are made perfect, the criticisms of others will still hurt. Don’t run away, physically or emotionally. That is our natural response to pain. Resist it. Have a spiritual response instead. See the criticism as sent by a loving Father for your good rather than as being sent by some nasty character for your harm. Dick Jones, a dear friend and fellow-elder used to joke with me that God had appointed him the job of keeping me humble thru occasional criticisms. And there is some truth there we need to recognize. God uses all sorts for his messengers. In II Samuel 16 we read of King

David exiting Jerusalem, having been driven out by the forces of Absalom, his own rebellious son. On his way out of town he is met by a character named Shemei, a relative of Saul, who resented David for replacing Saul as king. Let's read II Samuel 16:5-13 (NLT)

As King David came to Bahurim, a man came out of the village cursing them. It was Shimei son of Gera, from the same clan as Saul's family. ⁶He threw stones at the king and the king's officers and all the mighty warriors who surrounded him. ⁷"Get out of here, you murderer, you scoundrel!" he shouted at David. ⁸"The Lord is paying you back for all the bloodshed in Saul's clan. You stole his throne, and now the Lord has given it to your son Absalom. At last you will taste some of your own medicine, for you are a murderer!" ⁹"Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king?" Abishai son of Zeruiah demanded. "Let me go over and cut off his head!" ¹⁰"No!" the king said. "Who asked your opinion, you sons of Zeruiah! If the Lord has told him to curse me, who are you to stop him?" ¹¹Then David said to Abishai and to all his servants, "My own son is trying to kill me. Doesn't this relative of Saul have even more reason to do so? Leave him alone and let him curse, for the Lord has told him to do it. ¹²And perhaps the Lord will see that I am being wronged and will bless me because of these curses today." ¹³So David and his men continued down the road, and Shimei kept pace with them on a nearby hillside, cursing and throwing stones and dirt at David.

This was not intended as constructive criticism. This was just nastiness, but I love how David took it. Perhaps the Lord sent him. And David accepted the pain.

Thirdly, when you receive criticism, value it as an aid to righteousness. If you hunger and thirst for righteousness you are going to cherish anything that will help. Interesting text in Proverbs 27:5-7 (NLT) *An open rebuke is better than hidden love! ⁶Wounds from a sincere friend are better than many kisses from an enemy. ⁷A person who is full refuses honey, but even bitter food tastes sweet to the hungry.* All of that passage relates to our subject, but it is especially the last verse I want you to see. A man with a full stomach, has no interest in the tastiest of morsels. But, if you are starved, you will eat anything of nourishment – even if it is bitter, as long as it addresses your appetite. In the context of the passage, the bitter food is the wounds that come from a friend, or open rebuke. Unpleasant to be sure, but valued by the man who wants to learn the paths of righteousness.

The word “criticism” has sort of a negative ring to it. But there is an upside. We all need criticism. We are commanded by the God of love to reprove one another in love. Jesus did it often. It is an aid to righteousness and should be valued as such. The root of the word “confront” means to “turn your face toward” and when we turn our face toward another, rather than running or hiding from each other, we are expressing value in a positive way.

Fourthly, when you listen to criticism, evaluate its accuracy. You will receive some criticism that is right on target. You will also receive some criticism that misses the mark. You want to figure out what you are dealing with. Part of that is realizing whom you are dealing with. If the enemies of

God oppose me that may be a positive indicator. Consider whether the critic and you differ on the standards of evaluation. Some oppose me because I am a conservative Presbyterian. They are against my brand, my team, not really me. I just happen to be the closest representative. If you aren't sure whether a critique is accurate you may want to seek additional opinions, preferably from people you can trust to speak truth rather than flattery. Just don't go to them looking to gossip about the one who is criticizing you. Sometimes more viewpoints help, sometimes not. But do your best to be honest with yourself as you evaluate a criticism. Don't proudly justify, but look inside for a possible speck or log in the eye you may have missed.

Fifthly, respond to criticism by giving thanks and a gentle reply. I really do appreciate it when people come to *me* with their criticisms. I want a chance to respond, and maybe to do better. What is disturbing is when people go talking to others about that sorry ole so-and-so, or when they nurture a bad attitude toward you. Critics should be welcomed with a word of thanks and a response that is gentle. In almost every criticism there is something, however small, with which you can agree. And on those points your agreement should be made known. You don't have to be false to be nice. When criticized, remember to give thanks and a gentle reply.

Sixthly, do not criticize your critics in return. At least not in the same conversation. Don't snap back by pointing out what is wrong with your reprover. Do you know what that shows? It indicates that you are justifying yourself, that you are taking the spotlight of truth away from yourself and pointing it on others, that you are not really interested in self-improvement at all. If you attack your critics you will soon lose them, and that to your own hurt.

Seventhly, when appropriate, defend yourself humbly. In the Bible we have accounts of godly men, including Jesus, defending themselves when criticized, as well as choosing not to do so on other occasions. It is a judgment call to be made in love not in pride. Mark 15:3-5 *The chief priests began to accuse Him harshly. ⁴Then Pilate questioned Him again, saying, "Do You not answer? See how many charges they bring against You!" ⁵But Jesus made no further answer; so Pilate was amazed.* If you are secure in the Lord you don't always need to make a defense. There are occasions though, when, for the sake of the critic, or some other person or cause, you need to give an explanation or defense of your conduct. When you do it, do it humbly.

The eighth thing I encourage you to do when criticized is to look for the complete picture. Put the criticism in a bigger context. For instance, when my preaching is criticized by one of our faithful members, I try to remind myself of this -- that despite their stated disapproval this individual

chooses, among all the various options available to him on Sunday morning, to sit under my preaching. I'm amazed people do. That, in itself, is a compliment that outweighs almost any criticism I have received. One other thing I have noticed too is that my biggest fans and my critics tend to share the same anatomy. That's right. I include my wife in that number. You husbands and wives will be able to understand what I am saying. But, in our self-delusion, we often hear people in absolutes. We think, "She sees me as all bad" or "He sees me as all good" when it is almost never like that. Aim to see the bigger picture, a picture that will usually be fairly mixed. Doing that will help you handle praise and criticism as you see a more complete picture.

The ninth thing to do when criticized is to rest in the judgments of God. I Corinthians 4:5 (ESV) *Do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.* There is a higher court to whom the critic and the criticized will give an account. If you believe that you are being unjustly criticized, relax and wait for the great day. The righteous will be vindicated and the truth will be known.

Finally, and tenthly, when you are criticized refresh your soul in the Lord. This is where you turn to your Father in heaven and you allow Him to speak to your heart, to remind you of His love that is unconditional and never-ending. Bathe your tired spiritual bones in the sweet waters of the gospel. Maybe music and worship, but however you may, do it. If you don't do that your world will be shaped by your critics rather than by gospel truth. Who are you paying attention to? The fool listens only to his fans. And a different kind of fool listens only to his critics. We must listen to the Lord our God and be open to His reproofs and His affirmations and be refreshed by His love that is both perfect and pure.

I often go for this refreshment to Psalm 139. There David says 1-4 *O LORD, You have searched me and known me. ²You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar. ³You scrutinize my path and my lying down, and are intimately acquainted with all my ways. ⁴Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O LORD, You know it all.* I rejoice in that! God knows me. He doesn't guess at my motives. He knows. That is comforting and challenging. Now see how David ends the psalm as he consciously stands before the Lord to seek His evaluation 23-24 *Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; ²⁴and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.*

May God be gracious to remind us of these critical things. Shall we pray. As we pray, take some moments to hear what the Lord is speaking to you. Is this a place for some repentance? For some acknowledgement of pride and defensiveness? For confessing that you have made God small and men big in your eyes and emotions? Maybe there is a need to confess that you haven't lovingly confronted when that was needed. You stuffed or just vented or maybe you spoke your criticisms to the wrong parties instead of lovingly approaching a brother or sister. Take a moment and have some personal dealings with God and then I will close us.