

Grace Notes

How to Handle a Critic

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When Sanballat heard that [Nehemiah and the Jews] were rebuilding the [Jerusalem] wall he exploded in anger,.... In the company of his Samaritan cronies and military he let loose: "What are these miserable Jews doing? Do they think they can get everything back to normal overnight?...At his side, Tobiah the Ammonite jumped in and said, "That's right! What do they think they're building?"

Some of [the Pharisees] were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely....

***[The ungodly] are grumblers and fault-finders; they follow their own evil desires; they boast about themselves and flatter others for their own advantage.
(Nehemiah 4:1-3, The Message; Mark 3:2, NIV; Jude 16, NIV)***

I have in my files an article written by Charles Lowery entitled, "*Arrows in the Back.*" As a long-time pastor, teacher, as well as a professional counselor, Lowery knows what he's talking about when addressing the stinging barbs of criticism. Originally written to church leadership, not only do the principles apply to all walks of life, but I thought you might simply enjoy reading his humorous and insightful thoughts regarding the often arduous task of dealing with those "wonderful" members of our local churches known as the "fault-finders." Below is an excerpt from Lowery's article:

A new arrival in heaven was surprised to see a suggestion box along Main Street. He turned to a more seasoned resident and asked, "*If everybody is supposed to be happy in heaven, why is there a suggestion box?*" The experienced tenant replied, "*Because some people aren't really happy unless they complain.*" Critics are everywhere, even in the church. They weren't born again – they were born against. At the beginning of every meeting you feel like calling on them for a word of criticism just to get it over with. Someone has said that any fool can criticize and condemn and complain, and most fools do. For every step forward, there is an equal and opposite criticism. All leaders are criticized. Winston Churchill received a standing ovation, and a lady commented how flattering it must be to receive that kind of applause. "Yes," he said, "*but also know that if it were my hanging, the crowd would be twice the size.*" What do you do with critics? Remember that critics who try to whittle you down are only trying to reduce you to their size. Take the rocks thrown at you and build something. Everybody's not out to get you. Don't quit going to football games because you think they are talking about you in the huddle.¹



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It should be noted that there is a difference between a “critic” and a friend/boss/spouse who’s admonishing you and/or attempting to help you with *constructive* criticism. Fault-finders, to be specific, have little in mind that is constructive. They are the same now as they were in Bible times. Like Sanballat and “*his Samaritan cronies*,” they tend to run in packs i.e. “*critics run with critics.*”² Like the Pharisees, they tend to set themselves up as the standard arrogantly looking for ways to accuse you. And, in the words of Jude, they tend to flatter you out of one side of their mouth while criticizing you out of the other side. “*With flattering lips and a double-heart they speak, ... His speech is smooth as butter, yet war is in his heart,*”³ David described them.

So, how do you handle critics?

English Puritan, Richard Baxter, once said, “*It is not the reading of many books which is necessary to make a man wise or good, but the well-reading of a few...*” One book I’ve read at least three times is Chuck Swindoll’s classic narrative commentary on Nehemiah entitled, “*Hand Me Another Brick.*” He includes a quote by J. Oswald Sanders, “*[A leader’s] humility will nowhere be seen more clearly than in the manner in which he accepts and reacts to [criticism].*”⁴ I must confess – there are times I’ve responded well...and other times I’ve just flat blown it. Few things test us so as critics – especially when they’re mean-spirited.

There is neither time nor room here to comment as I’d like to, but here are a few, condensed fundamentals in handling the critics in your life:

1. Respond rather than react. James put it this way: “*Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up.*”⁵ “Humbling yourself” does not mean making yourself a doormat. What it does mean is, from the onset of the criticism, acknowledge that not one “arrow” has pierced your heart that God didn’t permit. Remember, God is always on His throne. Access *His* recourses (wisdom, patience, compassion, etc.) to resolve the situation.
2. Know this: “hurting people hurt people.” This is an axiom of professional counseling. If you know someone who is “infected” with a spirit of criticism, know that there are issues within that person that go much deeper than meets the eye that causes them to be habitually critical. Jesus said, “*The mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.*”⁶
3. Find the critic and speak the truth in love. Granted, many times critics are “ghosts.” They are as adept at being invisible as they are criticizing. But, on occasion, you may have the benefit of knowing exactly who “is shooting the arrows.” Truth and love are two components, Paul said, that help our spiritual growth.⁷ Jesus attracted the mother-lode of critics of His day. And in every single case, Jesus responded with truth & love.
4. Do NOT retaliate. “*One of the knottiest situations a [person] can put himself into is personal retaliation.*”⁸ Be “*kindhearted, and humble in spirit;*” Peter wrote, “*not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead.*”⁹ I like Eugene Peterson’s rendering of Romans 12:19 in *The Message*: “*Don’t hit back.*”
5. Much prayer – much power. “*Nehemiah fought his [critics] through prayer.*”¹⁰

A wonderful study on this topic can be found by simply reading through the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. You’ll find Nehemiah to be absolutely human on all fronts, not praying “pretty” prayers, but rather gut-wrenching, indignant prayers. And you’ll also find a man who humbled himself before the Lord. It’s a fascinating story and one of the premiere biblical accounts in learning to handle handling criticism.

Soli Deo Gloria, Nick

¹ Charles Lowery. *Arrows in the Back*. SBC Life, May 2000.

² Chuck Swindoll. *Hand Me Another Brick*, 1978.

³ Psalm 12:2, NASB; Psalm 55:21, NIV

⁴ J. Oswald Sanders. *Spiritual Leadership*, 1967. Quoted by Chuck Swindoll. *Hand Me Another Brick*, 1978.

⁵ James 4:10, NIV

⁶ Matthew 12:34, NASB

⁷ Ephesians 4:15, NIV

⁸ Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick*.

⁹ 1 Peter 3:9, NASB

¹⁰ Swindoll. *Hand Me Another Brick*.