

How Do You Take Criticism?

By Paul R. Blake

A man goes to his doctor for chest pains. The physician tells him that he has heart disease and is not likely to live much longer if he doesn't lose weight and stop smoking. The patient is offended and retorts, "I'd like a second opinion." The doctor replies, "You have bad breath, too."

How do you take criticism? Some folks are quite adept at criticizing others, but cannot take criticism themselves. There is no point in addressing people like that. They will either fail to get the point of the instruction thinking it applies to someone else, or they will be affronted and the conversation ends. When one explodes at constructive criticism, it indicates that he has problems with the sins of pride and temper.

Others take the Teflon approach to criticism. Nothing ever sticks to them. When corrected, these people dismiss the critic as unqualified to make a judgment of them; and, therefore his assessment must be flawed and irrelevant. Or perhaps, they will make excuses and explanations why, under the unique circumstances of their lives, the corrective instruction doesn't apply.

A third group views correction as persecution. "Why are you picking on me?" is often the lament of one who sees himself as a victim of an unjust attack, rather than the beneficiary of necessary correction.

Another type of person is quite surprised by constructive criticism. Unaccustomed to having subordinates suggest he made an error, he is stunned when someone points it out. This mind set often afflicts men in political office, with high military rank, and powerful positions in industry.

These reactions to criticism are not limited to men in high places, nor are they confined to persons with emotional illnesses. Occasionally, members of a local church (elders, deacons, preachers, teachers, and members) can and do react poorly to being corrected.

An enlightening and somewhat amusing account of a king who couldn't take criticism is given in the Old Testament. He surrounded himself with prophets and courtiers who would parrot back to him anything that he said. No one had the courage to tell him he was wrong except Micaiah, and he was sent to prison for telling the truth. *"But Jehoshaphat said, Is there not still a prophet of the LORD here, that we may inquire of Him? So the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, There is still one man by whom we may inquire of the LORD; but I hate him, because he never prophesies good concerning me, but always evil. He is Micaiah the son of Imla. And Jehoshaphat said, Let not the king say such things! Then the king of Israel called one of his officers and said, Bring Micaiah the son of Imla quickly! ... Then the messenger who had gone to call Micaiah spoke to him, saying, Now listen, the words of the prophets with one accord encourage the king. Therefore please let your word be like the word of one of them, and speak encouragement. And Micaiah said, As the LORD lives, whatever my God says, that I will speak. Then he came to the king; and the king said to him, Micaiah, shall we go to war against Ramoth Gilead, or shall I refrain? And he said, Go and prosper, and they shall be delivered into your hand! So the king said to him, How many times shall I make you swear that you tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD? Then he said, I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd. And the LORD said, These have no master. Let each return to his house in peace. And the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, Did I not tell you he would not prophesy good concerning me, but evil?"* (2Chron. 18:6-8, 12-17). Hating Micaiah for correcting him was a foolish and dangerous attitude.

Solomon said that a wise man will profit from straight-forward instruction. *"Open rebuke is better Than love carefully concealed. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But the kisses of an enemy are deceitful"* (Prov. 27:5-6). How can we be wise and learn to take criticism well?

First, do not answer the critic immediately. Instantly, we are tempted to defend ourselves by fending off what we see as an attack. Instead, thank the speaker and promise to give careful thought to what he has said. Then, go and do precisely that; give some conscientious attention to what he said. Review the content of the correction, and to see if parallels can be found in the behavior or speech it was intended to remedy. It is important at this point to avoid rationalizing away errors. Try to see your actions and speech through the eyes of a weaker brother or from the perspective of a wiser person. Taking time to think about a correction will give us opportunity to see mistakes made but not noticed at the time.

Second, should it turn out that the criticism was unjustified, do not answer defensively or with outrage. No one profits from angry denials, or loud self-vindication. Instead, thank the brother for having your best interests at heart. Tell him that even though he was mistaken this time, you would appreciate

his continued vigilance on your behalf. Solomon praised the soft answer (Prov. 15:1), saying that a soft tongue can break bones (25:15). If there is a malicious agenda in the critic, answering him in this way will dispel it and make him a friend. It is the kind of reply the Lord would make (1Peter 2:23).

Third, do not shift responsibility. It is pitiful to listen to someone blame others or "circumstances beyond his control" for his mistakes. Do not succumb to this temptation. It makes one look dishonest and weak. If the correction is valid, accept it, apologize for the error, and change the behavior. Often, one expends more energy trying to protect his ego, than he would use in correcting his mistake. Making excuses, blaming others, and other elements of the language of victimology just puts the Devil's words in one's mouth. Show character and take the chastisement without whining.

Fourth, do not return a criticism without reflection. Frequently, upon feeling the sting of being corrected, one will criticize the critic. This closely resembles revenge. Imagine a brother saying, "Friend, you made a mistake," to which he responds, "well, you're not perfect, either!" Clearly, this is petty and disingenuous. If a critic needs correction, instruct him after having removed "the beam from your own eye."

The Search for a Quality Life By Dee Bowman

Ecclesiastes is the answer to the perennial question, "what is life." It gives answers in both positive and negative ways, telling us what life is and what it's not. Ecclesiastes is also the product of a grand experiment with life.

Solomon tried all that life has to offer, plumbed the depths of every area of thought with a view to ascertaining what is good about life. He tried to find substance to life in wine, but found none. He tried to find it in folly, entertainment, but found none. He sought for a quality life with agriculture and with botanical gardens, but found none. He had hordes of servants and great wealth; he found no real joy in any of it. He tried everything. "Whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them. I withheld not from my heart any joy," he said. He found no substance to life no matter where he turned.

Solomon found some quality in good friends and good food, some in doing a good job, no matter the assignment, some in a resignation to the allotments of divine providence, but at the end of the experiment, he concluded that a good life is possible only when one fears God and keeps his commandments.

Don't work too hard to find a quality life here. You won't find it. (Ecc. 2:1-11)

A Moments Wisdom

--We must die! These words are hard, but they are followed by a great happiness: it is in order to be with God that we die. (Francis of Sales; 1567-1622)

--We are at another crossroads. No question is of greater moment than this: shall we let the hostility of this world scare us into becoming diplomats on good terms with the world, the flesh and the devil, instead of flaming witnesses in a head-on collision with a godless age? (Vance Havner; 1901-1986)

--The gospel is not a secret to be hoarded but a story to be heralded. Too many Christians are stuffing themselves with gospel blessings, while millions have never had a taste. (Vance Havner)

--To assert that a world as intricate as ours emerged from chaos by chance is about as sensible as to claim that Shakespeare's dramas were composed by rioting monkeys in a print shop. (Merrill C. Tenney, 1962)

--The most malicious kind of hatred is that which is built upon a theological foundation. (George Sarton, 1927)