

Reacting To Criticism

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Today, many politicians use a strategy of destroying their opponents by criticizing them in a demeaning way. Many in the press demean people—just look at the headlines in some of the well-known newspapers, or the stories on some of the news channels. Critical people make rude comments, judge our decisions, talk at length about what we're doing wrong, and rarely have anything positive to say. If we are not careful, this can influence us. Look at this nation: It is suffering from a critical standpoint; it is a critical society, and a critical mood permeates, it seems, everything today.

Sadly, we all have said something, at one time or another, about someone, or heard something said about us that was not very complimentary. How should we handle and react to such derogatory comments and complaints about us? There will be plenty that come against the church as well.

Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States, made the following comment regarding the many critical remarks made about him while President:

If I were to try to read, much less answer, all the attacks made on me, this shop might as well be closed for any other business. I do the very best I know how—the very best I can; and I mean to keep doing so until the end. If the end brings me out all right, what is said against me won't amount to anything. If the end brings me out wrong, ten angels swearing I was right would make no difference.

Solomon has something to say regarding comments made about us:

Ecclesiastes 7:20-22 For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin. Also do not take to heart everything people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. For many times, also, your own heart has known that even you have cursed others.

The *Expositor's Bible Commentary* has a comment about this passage that I think is worthwhile:

. . . wickedness refers to a general way of life in which acts of sin are the norm. Here, however, righteousness is the settled way, though sins certainly occur and need to be repented of. The godly person should be genuine and sincere. He should not listen to gossip, especially if he is hoping to hear himself criticized or cursed especially by those who can observe him closely, such as his servant. An old saying is that "no man is a hero to his valet." The criticism may not be deserved, but again it may be. At any rate, it is a reminder that at some time everyone has been guilty of critical gossip.

This is not something that is directed at anyone or us. Actually, I'm going to flip the direction of this and talk more about what it means to be criticized and how we are to react.

The words "cursing" and "cursed" in verses 21-22 are translated from the Hebrew word *qalal*. It describes various grades of criticism and basically has the sense of 'to make light of', either harshly or mildly. *Strong's Concordance* says, "*qalal*'s root literally means swift, small, sharp, etc."

So, the root suggests something that happens quickly and is seemingly insignificant when it happens; nevertheless, it is cutting to the one who receives it. And *qalal* figuratively means "easy, trifling, and vile (as in vilifying or reviling someone); uttering violent accusations; invoking evil wishes upon, or cursing."

It's wise to ignore what people say about us, is what Solomon is saying. If they speak well of us, it feeds our pride. If they speak ill of us, it stirs up our anger and depression. Either way, it can lead us to sin.

When we receive criticism, our human nature wants to lash back in defense. But when we're angered by what we hear spoken of us, rather than tell

someone else, it is vital to take it to God in prayer, asking Him if there is any truth in what was said. And, if there is any truth in it, repent and be thankful for the revelation.

Since most people are very critical of others, we don't have to look very long before we find that someone has said something negative about us. Sometimes it is a friend or relative that offends us unintentionally.

There are times when we hear through a second party that someone spoke badly of us. It's important to realize that the alleged gossip may have misunderstood or given a false report of what was said. This type of thing can destroy a friendship.

Proverbs 29:12-13 If a ruler pays attention to lies, all his servants become wicked. [i.e., in the ruler's eyes] The poor man and the oppressor have this in common: The LORD gives light to the eyes of both [meaning that we can see clearly if we are not biased in our direction, or trying to tell people's sins].

Wisdom dictates that we should not jump to conclusions, but must give the other person the benefit of the doubt. Otherwise, everyone begins to look like a conspirator against us.

It's very tough to control the tongue. It is a full-time job to control our own tongue, so we certainly cannot expect to control the tongues of others.

James 3:2-3 For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. Indeed, we put bits in horses mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body.

Perhaps there are many more negative things said of us than we think, and by those we least expect. Nevertheless, it is easier to overlook twenty offenses than to avenge one. No matter how hard we try we cannot avoid criticism. Negative things are said every day.

Elbert Hubbard, an early 20th century American author said, “To escape criticism—do nothing, say nothing, be nothing.”

If you were to live your life trying to avoid criticism, you would accomplish nothing; and there would still be someone out there criticizing you for your silence and inactivity. It is going to come whether we like it or not, and whether we try to avoid it or not.

One of the principles in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is that justice will come to the one who puts down or condemns another:

Luke 18:9-14 Jesus spoke this parable to “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: A Pharisee and a tax collector went to the temple to pray. The Pharisee stood and prayed with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men— extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'" The tax collector stood way back, would not even raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' Jesus concluded, “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

There is often a self-righteous attitude in those who say negative things about others, which weakens the validity of their negative comments. They are not disapproving of people for having faults, but for having faults that seem different from their own. So why bother to pay attention to their criticisms?

David advises that we should not let negative comments get to us. We should not get irritated at the crabby statements or sneaky suspicions made of us. Nothing can be hidden from God. He hears what people say about us, and He hears our words and what we say about others.

I wonder if Solomon was thinking of his father, David, being cursed by Shimei when he wrote Ecclesiastes 7:21: “. . . do not take to heart everything people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you.” The incident is recorded in II Samuel 16:5-13:

II Samuel 16:5-13 When King David came to Bahurim, the leaders and the people lined up on both sides of the road. Then a man named Shimei from Saul's family began protesting and cursing David continuously, even throwing stones at him and at all his servants. Shimei cursed, yelling, "Come out! Come out! You bloodthirsty man, you rogue! The LORD has brought upon you all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and the LORD has delivered the kingdom into the hand of Absalom your son. So now you are caught in your own evil, because you are a bloodthirsty man!" Then Abishai said to the king, "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Please, let me go over and take off his head! But the king said, "What have I to do with you, ...? So, let him curse, because the LORD has said to him, 'Curse David.' Who then shall say, 'Why have you done so?'" Then David said to Abishai and all his servants, "Absalom who came from my own body seeks my life. How much more now may this Benjamite? Let him alone, and let him curse; for so the LORD has ordered him. It may be that the LORD will look on my affliction, and that the LORD will repay me with good for his cursing this day."

Even though David was under the stress of the rebellion by his son Absalom, he did not get angry but committed himself to God. By doing so, he was able to use wisdom in handling the situation. God often requires great proof of patience and forbearance in our trials. He sometimes requires us to hear someone cursing us to see if we can endure it with compassion instead of desiring vengeance.

David brings up an interesting spiritual principle here: When we accept another's right or wrong criticism without retaliation in thought or action, it may be that God, in seeing our anguish, will compensate us with a blessing. God sees all.

Jesus gives us insight into what our reaction should be to one who has wronged us. He says we should have compassion on the person and forgive him. If we want God to forgive us for things we say about others, we had better first forgive those who offend or harm us. Jesus tells us,

Matthew 6:14-15 "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

So, the next time you are offended, remember the inspired wise words of Solomon in Ecclesiastes 7: ". . . do not take to heart everything people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. For many times, also, your own heart has known that even you have cursed others."