

Wisdom Challenge #11 – “Receiving and Processing Criticism Well”

Four Devotionals and Additional Scripture

Collected by Sharon Stults

The Gracious Pastor

Verse: “Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry,” James 1:19 NLT.

In the late 19th century two well-known London pastors, Charles Spurgeon and Joseph Parker had a very public misunderstanding at one point. Pastor Parker made a comment one day about the poverty level of the children that Spurgeon received into his orphanage. Someone who heard him completely misrepresented what he said to Spurgeon and made it sound as if Parker criticized the orphanage itself. The next Sunday, Spurgeon publicly criticized Parker for his terrible attitude towards his orphanage. It was so awful, newspapers reported on the public verbal flogging and everyone in London spoke about it.

The next Sunday lots of visitors showed up to Parker’s church to see what he would do. From the pulpit, Parker said, “I understand Dr. Spurgeon is not in his pulpit today, and this is the Sunday they use to take an offering for the orphanage. I suggest we take a love offering here instead.” The ushers wound up emptying out the offering plates three times. Spurgeon visited Parker shortly afterwards, apologizing to him and thanking him.

To think about: How many times do Christians embarrass the cause of Christ because we don’t receive criticism well from one another? Even if Parker had publicly criticized the orphanage, Spurgeon’s response was out of line entirely and damaged the reputation of Christ in a very public way. Thank God, Parker did not respond in kind. Your tiff with another Christian may not be so public but you do not know who is watching and listening when you receive criticism poorly. The Greek word for “quick to listen,” depicts a champion running a race with all his might. In other words, we should be champions of listening as James exhorts us. God will use unlikely people to get our attention on a matter. As the old saying goes, “God may assault our minds to get the attention of our hearts.”

The Honest Evangelist

Verse: “Don’t think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us,” Romans 12:3b NLT.

George Whitfield was a famous evangelist in England during the 1700s. Often, hundreds of people would come to Christ for the first time at his meetings. God used him to spark a large revival and most people thought very highly of him. Some, not so much. He received critical, mean-spirited letters at times, as most full-time ministry workers do. People who knew him

reported that sometimes he would become discouraged by the hate and mockery in some of the letters.

Then, Whitfield decided that the best approach with these folks was to simply be open and honest. Here is what he wrote back to one of his fiercest critics: “I thank you heartily for your letter. As for what you and my other enemies are saying against me, I know worse things about myself than you will ever say about me.”

To think about: My husband and I have long loved George Whitfield. His combination of fire and humility is so appealing to us, we named our first Labrador after him. I think one of the reasons I can respond badly to criticism is because it attacks that persona I’m trying to project to people. God wants authenticity. It disarms critics when we agree with them. “You know, let me think about that. There is probably some truth in what you are saying.” Maybe offer an apology for upsetting, disappointing or hurting them. Come on, we know when someone’s over the target about who we really are, we just don’t want to admit it. What if we did? How different would the body of Christ be if we didn’t have to work so hard to get each other to own up to our flaws?

The Thick-Skinned Contractor

Verse: “Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. ⁵ Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders,” Nehemiah 4:4 NIV.

A man named George Washington Goethals oversaw the building of the Panama Canal. It was the toughest building contract he had ever handled. The climate and geography created a lot of natural obstacles for the project. An even bigger challenge was all his armchair critics back in the United States who declared he’d never finish such a project. One day, one of his workers asked him, “Are you ever going to send back a reply to your critics?”

“Yes,” said Goethals.

“When?”

“When it’s finished,” Goethals answered back.

Sometimes we need to completely ignore unjust and untrue criticism, simply not waste brain space and emotional energy on it. Holy Spirit will give us wisdom as to which criticism needs to be dismissed completely. Remember, Satan wants to sidetrack you any way he can. Getting you to be hurt, upset, or negotiating with demonized people works for him, not you. Nehemiah had to blow off demonically inspired critics repeatedly in the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s wall. If he had stopped to keep engaging with those wicked men, the wall might never have been rebuilt. Ask God to help you discern whether criticism should be considered or ignored.

The Persistent President

Verse: “Obviously I’m not trying to win the approval of people, but of God. If pleasing people were my goal, I would not be Christ’s servant,” Galatians 1:10 NLT.

One day, an army officer who worked under President Abraham Lincoln asked if he could write a newspaper article to answer back all the administration’s critics, specifically the Committee on the Conduct of the War. This is Lincoln’s reply. “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.”

Some of us become obsessive when we are criticized, even leaders. We know we are doing what God called us to do and we are determined to convince everyone we are doing right things. This wastes valuable kingdom time. All filled-with-fire Christians face opposition. Again, Holy Spirit will help those who ask for discernment. You cannot ignore all criticism but neither can you answer all of it when it comes to the tune of dozens or hundreds of dislikes or emails in a day. President Lincoln’s comments encourage me as to hearing from God and plowing forward. He was a man of prayer who agonized over his decisions. I know he took great pains to listen to critics. He specifically selected them for his cabinet and often heeded their advice, but always considered it. (“Team of Rivals” by Doris Kearns Goodwin) Only Holy Spirit can tell us which criticisms to ignore and which to ponder and then act upon.

Helpful Scripture

If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. Matthew 18:15

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” Proverbs 15:1

The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise. Whoever ignores instruction despises himself, but he who listens to reproof gains intelligence. Proverbs 15:31-32

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice. Proverbs 12:15

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. James 1:19-20

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Galatians 6:1

Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy. Proverbs 27:6

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth. 2 Timothy 2:24-25

Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another. Proverbs 27:17