



The Cross And Criticism

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On January 28, 1986, the space shuttle Challenger and its crew embarked on a mission to broaden educational horizons and promote the advancement of scientific knowledge. The most outstanding objective of the Challenger 51-L mission was the delivery of educational lessons from space by teacher Christa McAuliffe. A lesson was, indeed, delivered, but not one which anyone expected.

Just 75 seconds after liftoff, tragedy struck. Before a watching world the shuttle suddenly erupted overhead, disintegrating the cabin along with its crew. The debris of metal, blood and bones plummeted to earth, along with our nation's glory.

What had gone wrong? That was the pressing question everyone asked. As teams of researchers examined the wreckage, the specific cause was soon found. The problem was with the O-rings (circular rubber seals), which had been designed to fit snugly into the joints of the booster engine sections. Evidently, the O-rings had become defective under adverse conditions, and the resulting mechanical failure led to the tragedy. Was that the whole story?

The truth eventually got out. The *New York Times* put it frankly: the ultimate cause of the space shuttle disaster was pride. A group of top managers failed to listen carefully to the warnings, advice and criticisms given by those down the line who were concerned about the operational reliability of certain parts of the booster engine under conditions of abnormal stress. Just think: heeding criticism could have saved seven human lives.

As a pastor, church leader, and lecturer for Peacemaker Ministries, I am blessed with the opportunity to minister to people and congregations in conflict. Among the many things I've come to learn is the dominant role that giving and taking criticism has in exacerbating conflict. Yet, even more, I've learned that the remedy wonderfully provided by God requires us to return to the cross of Christ. For our present purposes, I want us to look at the problem of taking criticism.

THE DYNAMIC OF DEFENDING AGAINST CRITICISM

First of all, let me define what I mean by criticism. I'm using criticism in a broad sense as referring to *any judgment made about you by another, which declares that you fall short of a particular standard*. The standard may be God's or man's. The judgment may be true or false. It may be given gently with a view to correction, or harshly and in a condemnatory fashion. It may be given by a friend or by an enemy. But whatever the case, it is a judgment or criticism about you, that you have fallen short of a standard.

However it comes, most of us would agree that criticism is difficult to take. Who of us doesn't know someone with whom we need to be especially careful in our remarks lest they blow up in response to our suggested corrections? Unfortunately, as I travel around the country, the tale is often told that many people would never dare confront or criticize their pastor or leader for fear of retaliation. Many just find another organization to work for or church to attend.

In fact, don't you know of leaders who select those to be nearest to them who are easiest on them? How many times have you been warned to "walk on eggshells" around that person?

As sad a commentary as this is, such people are not much different from me. I, too, do not like criticism. Any criticism is hard for me to take. I'd much rather be commended than corrected, praised than rebuked. I'd much rather judge than be judged! And I do not think that I am alone in this. The more I listen, the more I hear the dynamic of defensiveness against criticism.

In counseling, I see it in the humorous way a couple will be diverted from the issue at hand to debate who said what, when, and where. Or in how people debate back and forth as to whether it was a Tuesday or a Wednesday when they did something.

Why do we expend so much time and energy swatting at these flies with sledgehammers? Why are our hearts and minds so instantly engaged and our emotions surging with great vigor in our defense? The answer is simple. These issues are not minor or insignificant. We defend that which we deem of great value. We think it is our life we are saving. We believe something much larger will be lost if we do not use every means to rescue it. Our name, our reputation, our honor, our glory.

"If I don't point out that *I've* been misunderstood, misquoted, or falsely accused, then others won't know *I'm right*. And if I don't point out *my* rightness, nobody will. I will be scorned and condemned in the eyes of others."

Do you see the *idol of self* here? The desire for self-justification? But idols have legs. Because of this deep idolatrous desire for self-justification, the tragedy of the Space Shuttle gets played out over and over again in our relationships. It destroys our ability to listen and learn, and it provokes us to quarrel.

Thus, for the sake of our pride and foolishness, we willingly suffer loss of friends,

spouse, or loved ones. Some of that destruction comes in the shape of a thin truce. We tolerate a cold war. We make a false peace. We pledge to each other to discuss only those things which have little significance for bettering our souls. We lay out land mines and threaten the other that we will explode in anger if they so much as raise the forbidden subject of my mistake, my error, or my sin.

This is how churches split and factions develop. We surround ourselves with “yes” men—people willing to never challenge, advise, or criticize us. Yet, while we go on defending ourselves against criticism, we find Scripture teaching something different.

CRITICISM COMMENDED

The ability to hear and heed correction or criticism is commended in Scripture, particularly in Proverbs. Being teachable, able and willing to receive correction, is a mark of the wise. And the wise father or mother will encourage as well as model such an attitude for their daughters and sons.

The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man *listens to advice* (Prov. 12:15).

Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who *take advice* (Prov. 13:10).

A rebuke *impresses* a man of discernment more than a hundred lashes a fool (Prov. 17:10).

The ability to take advice, correction, and rebuke is not only considered a *mark* of the wise, and the inability a *mark* of the fool, but both the wise and the fool *reap* according to their ability to take criticism:

He who scorns instruction *will pay for it*, but he who respects a command is *rewarded* (Prov. 13:13).

Instruct a wise man and he will be *wiser still*; teach a righteous man and he will *add to his learning* (Prov. 9:9).

He who ignores discipline despises himself, but whoever heeds correction *gains understanding* (Prov. 15:32).

There is gain in taking criticism. No wonder David exclaims in Psalm 141:5: Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness; let him rebuke me—it is oil on my head. My head will not refuse it. David knows the profit of gaining wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. He knows rebukes are a kindness, a blessing, an honor.

Ask yourself: Is that how you look at a rebuke? Is that how you perceive criticism, correction or counsel? Do you want to look at it that way?

How can we move from always being quick to defend ourselves against any and all criticism toward becoming instead like David who saw it as gain? The answer is through understanding, believing, and affirming all that God says about us in the cross of Christ.

Paul summed it up when he said, “I have been crucified with Christ.” A believer is one

who identifies with all that God affirms and condemns in Christ's crucifixion. God affirms in Christ's crucifixion the whole truth about Himself: His holiness, goodness, justice, mercy, and truth as revealed and demonstrated in His Son, Jesus. Equally, in the cross God condemns the lie: sin, deceit, and the idolatrous heart. He condemns my sinfulness as well as my specific sins. Let's see how this applies to giving and taking criticism.

FIRST, IN CHRIST'S CROSS I AGREE WITH GOD'S JUDGMENT OF ME

I see myself as God sees me—a sinner. There is no escaping the truth: “No one is righteous, not even one” (Rom. 3:9-18). In response to my sin, the cross has criticized and judged me more intensely, deeply, pervasively, and truly than anyone else ever could. This knowledge permits us to say to all other criticism of us: “This is just a fraction of it.”

Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law (Gal. 3:10).

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it (James 2:10).

By faith, I affirm God's judgment of myself, that I am a sinner. I also believe that the answer to my sin lies in the cross.

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live (Gal. 2:20).

For we know that our old self was crucified with him [Jesus] so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin (Rom. 6:6).

If the cross says anything, it speaks about my sin. The person who says “I have been crucified with Christ” is a person well aware of his sinfulness. You'll never get life right by your own unaided efforts because all who rely on observing the law are under a curse. “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law” (Gal. 3:10). Thus the cross doesn't merely criticize or judge us; it condemns us for not doing *everything* written in God's law. Do you believe that? Do you feel the force of that criticism? Do you appreciate the thoroughness of God's judgment?

The crucified person also knows that he cannot defend himself against God's judgment by trying to offset his sin by his good works. Think about this fact: whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it (James 2:10).

To claim to be a Christian is to agree with all God says about our sin. As a person “crucified with Christ,” we admit, agree, and approve of God's judgment against us: There is no one righteous, not even one (Rom. 3:10).

SECOND, IN CHRIST'S CROSS I AGREE WITH GOD'S JUSTIFICATION OF ME

I must not only agree with God's judgment of me as sinner in the cross of Christ, but I must also agree with God's justification of me as sinner. Through the sacrificial love of Jesus, God justifies ungodly people (Rom. 3:21-26).

But the life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:20).

My goal is to boast in Christ's righteousness, not my own.

No one will be declared righteous in [God's] sight by observing the law (Rom. 3:20).

This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe (Rom. 3:22).

Pride breeds quarrels, says Solomon. Quarrels are often over who is right. Quarrels erupt in our idolatrous demand for self-justification. But not if I am applying the cross. For the cross not only declares God's just verdict against me as a sinner, but His declaration of righteousness by grace through faith in Christ.

The cross of Christ reminds me that the Son of God loved me and gave Himself for me. And because of this, God has thoroughly and forever accepted me in Christ. Here is how grace works: Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit (Gal. 3:13f).

What a sure foundation for the soul! Now, I don't practice self-justification, but boasting—boasting about Christ's righteousness for me.

If you truly take this to heart, the whole world can stand against you, denounce you, or criticize you, and you will be able to reply, "If God has justified me, who can condemn me?" "If God justifies me, accepts me, and will never forsake me, then why should I feel insecure and fear criticism?" "Christ took my sins, and I receive His Spirit. Christ takes my condemnation, and I receive His righteousness."

IMPLICATIONS FOR DEALING WITH CRITICISM

In light of God's judgment and justification of the sinner in the cross of Christ, we can begin to discover how to deal with any and all criticism. By agreeing with God's criticism of me in Christ's cross, I can face any criticism man may lay against me. In other words, no one can criticize me more than the cross has. And the most devastating criticism turns out to be the finest mercy. If you thus know yourself as having been crucified with Christ, then you can respond to any criticism, even mistaken or hostile criticism, without bitterness, defensiveness, or blameshifting. Such responses typically exacerbate and intensify conflict, and lead to the rupture of relationships. You can learn to hear criticism as constructive and not condemnatory because God has justified you.

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? (Rom. 8:33-34a).

Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness; let him rebuke me—it is oil on my head. My head will not refuse it (Ps. 141:5).

If I know myself as crucified with Christ, I can now receive another's criticism with this attitude: "You have not discovered a fraction of my guilt. Christ has said more about my sin, my failings, my rebellion and my foolishness than any man can lay against me. I thank you for your corrections. They are a blessing and a kindness to me. For even when they are wrong or misplaced, they remind me of my true faults and sins for which my Lord and Savior paid dearly when He went to the cross for me. I want to hear where your criticisms are valid."

The correction and advice that we hear are sent by our heavenly Father. They are His corrections, rebukes, warnings, and scoldings. His reminders are meant to humble me, to weed out the root of pride and replace it with a heart and lifestyle of growing wisdom, understanding, goodness, and truth. For example, if you can take criticism—however just or unjust—you'll learn to give it with gracious intent and constructive results. (*See the appendix on page 8: "Giving Criticism God's Way."*)

I do not fear man's criticism for I have already agreed with God's criticism. And I do not look ultimately for man's approval for I have gained by grace God's approval. In fact, His love for me helps me to hear correction and criticism as a kindness, oil on my head, from my Father who loves me and says, "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone He accepts as a son" (Heb. 12:5-6).

APPLYING WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

1. Critique yourself. How do I typically react to correction? Do I pout when criticized or corrected? What is my first response when someone says I'm wrong? Do I tend to attack the person? To reject the content of criticism? To react to the manner? How well do I take advice? How well do I seek it? Are people able to approach me to correct me? Am I teachable?

Do I harbor anger against the person who criticizes me? Do I immediately seek to defend myself, hauling out my righteous acts and personal opinions in order to defend myself and display my rightness? Can my spouse, parents, children, brothers, sisters, or friends correct me?

2. Ask the Lord to give you a desire to be wise instead of a fool. Use Proverbs to commend to yourself the goodness of being willing and able to receive criticism, advice, rebuke, counsel, or correction. Meditate upon the passages given above: Proverbs 9:9; 12:15; 13:10,13; 15:32; 17:10; Psalm 141:5.

3. Focus on your crucifixion with Christ. While I can say I have faith in Christ, and even say with Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ,” yet I still find myself not living in light of the cross. So I challenge myself with two questions. First, if I continually squirm under the criticism of others, how can I say I know and agree with the criticism of the cross? Second, if I typically justify myself, how can I say I know, love, and cling to God’s justification of me through Christ’s cross? This drives me back to contemplating God’s judgment and justification of the sinner in Christ on the cross. As I meditate on what God has done in Christ for me, I find a resolve to agree with and affirm all that God says about me in Christ, with whom I’ve been crucified.

4. Learn to speak nourishing words to others. I want to receive criticism as a sinner living within Jesus’ mercy, so how can I give criticism in a way that communicates mercy to another? Accurate, balanced criticism, given mercifully, is the easiest to hear—and even against that my pride rebels. Unfair criticism or harsh criticism (whether fair or unfair) is needlessly hard to hear. How can I best give accurate, fair criticism, well tempered with mercy and affirmation?

My prayer is that in your struggle against the sin of self-justification you will deepen your love for the glory of God as revealed in the gospel of His Son, and that you will grow wise by faith.

APPENDIX: GIVING CRITICISM GOD'S WAY

I see my brother/sister as one for whom Christ died (1 Cor. 8:11).

Keep on loving each other as brothers (Heb. 13:1).

I come as an equal, who also is a sinner.

Are we any better than they? Not at all. For there is no one righteous...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:9,23).

I prepare my heart lest I speak out of wrong motives.

All a man's ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the LORD (Prov. 16:2).

The heart of the righteous weighs its answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil (Prov. 15:28).

A wise man's heart guides his mouth, and his lips promote instruction (Prov. 16:23).

I examine my own life and confess my sin first.

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye (Matt. 7:3-5).

I am always patient, in it for the long haul (Eph. 4:2).

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. (1 Cor. 13:4).

My goal is not to condemn by debating points, but to build up through constructive criticism.

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may give grace to those who listen (Eph. 4:29).

I correct and rebuke my brother gently, in the hope that God will grant him the grace of repentance even as I myself repent only through His grace.

And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth... (2 Tim. 2:24-25).

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