

Introduction

Today, I'm going to preach about one of the most ironic aspects of human life. I say it's ironic because it's something that all of us get but that almost none of us want. And it's something that all of us desperately need but that almost none of us use when we get it. We see what that something is in the verses I read: Psalm 141:5; Proverbs 9:7-9; 12:1; and 27:5-6.

Criticism

I draw your attention to the following words in those verses: "reprove," "correct," "discipline," "reproof," and "rebuke." Those words show us what the verses are all about - criticism.

"Criticism" comes from the Greek word *kritikos*, which means literally "able to discern." Thus, the critic is one who discerns negative things about what we are or do and verbalizes them to us. He finds faults with what we are or do and tells us that they are. The emperor Ferdinand, for instance, said to Mozart about his opera *The Marriage of Figaro*, "**Far too noisy, my dear Mozart. Far too many notes.**" That is criticism and the verses I read teach that we will respond in one of two ways to it.

I have an old Laurel and Hardy videotape at home titled *Be Big*. It is, I believe, one of their best episodes. In it, a lodge brother persuades Laurel and Hardy to get out of doing something with their wives with these words: "**Remember, a man is only as big as the excuses he can make to his wife. So, be big! Got me? Be big!**"

Well, let me adapt that line and apply it to criticism. **A person is only as big or small as the criticisms he or she wants and uses.** According to that line, we'll respond in one of two ways when we're criticized. When people tell us what our faults are, we'll either be small or we'll be big. Those are the two mutually exclusive options open to us. Be small or be big. Let's examine both of those.

Be Small

First, most of us, when we're criticized, are small.

Psalms 141:5 and Proverbs 27:6 point out something about criticism that all of us know. It hurts. Notice the words they use with regard to it – "smite" and "wounds." Those words are accurately descriptive. That's how most of us feel when we're criticized. We feel smitten, wounded. The truth is, few things hurt most of us more than criticism does.

Which is why we dread it. Newspaper executive Lewis Simms grasped just that when he declared: "**The dread of criticism is the death of genius.**" That quotation assumes, and rightly so, that most of us dread criticism - so much so that we actually take it into account in our choosing and acting. We let it dictate what we decide and do. I knew parents in Akron who thought it'd be best to hold their son back in the first grade. But they didn't hold him back because of the criticism they'd get from their family and friends if they did. That's typical. Many of us dread criticism so much that we'll do almost anything to avoid it.

But none of us can avoid it altogether. We're going to be criticized. And Proverbs 9:8a reveals how most of us react when we are. We "hate" the critic. By "hate," it means "get mad at" or "resent." We get mad at or resent the one who tells us what our faults are. But we don't just hate the critic. According to Proverbs 9:7, most of us dishonor and insult him as well. We attack him in other words. It's tit for tat. The critic condemns us. So we condemn him right back. It almost always goes that way doesn't it when we're criticized. We hate the critic and, unless we're compelled not to, attack him as well.

I once overheard a sister tell her brother that he was too strict with his children. Whereupon he curtly replied right back, "**Well, at least I care enough about mine to discipline them.**" He was implying of course that she didn't.

You get what he did. He hated and attacked his critic. And that's what it means to be small. We get mad at and insult those who tell us what our faults are.

Be Big

But there's a second option open to us when we're criticized. Be big. To be big means three things.

Proverbs 9:8b discloses the first, "**Reprove a wise man and he will love you.**" We love the critic not hate him. There are two sides to this. On the negative side, we aren't mad at him. We have 0% anger. On the positive side, we are grateful to him. We have 100% gratitude. We're thoroughly thankful that he has told us what our faults are. That's the first thing it means to be big. We love the critic.

Proverbs 12:1 teaches us the second thing it means. It says, "**Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge.**" Notice the link between discipline, meaning criticism, and knowledge. That shows us what we should do when we're criticized. Learn! Not only love the critic, but learn from him as well. Discover, from his criticism, things about our actions or us that we need to know. Learning is a two step process.

First, understand the criticism. Criticism is always the result of a process the critic went through. He heard or observed something about us, analyzed it in terms of his values, beliefs, and information, and used logic to draw negative conclusions about us. Every person who criticizes us went through that process to do so. So, we try to comprehend it. We do that by asking him questions about: (1) what he heard or observed; (2) his values, beliefs, and information; and/or (3) the logic he used to draw his negative conclusions about us.

The second step in learning is to assess the criticism. We evaluate the critic's negative conclusions. Assessment, as Proverbs 9:9 makes clear, requires that we be open-minded. Our first inclination, especially when the criticism is on target, is to deny its validity. But if we're humble enough, we don't. We stack it up against reality - relate it to the relevant facts - instead. We don't do that defensively, in a way that justifies us. We do it objectively, seeing things as they really are.

Learning from the critic, as you can see, takes some thought on our part. We have to understand and assess his criticism of us.

To be big means a third thing. We correct our faults. Lawrence Kirby claims, **“All criticism is based on fact to a certain extent.”** I disagree. I’d say, **“Much criticism is based on fact to a certain extent.”** Some criticisms are totally bogus. We aren’t at fault in any way and so there’s nothing to correct. But many are either totally or partially valid. They do reveal some fault or faults about us. So we act to correct them. We change whatever there is that needs changed.

That then is what it means to be big. We love the critic, learn from him, and correct our faults. Those three things are interrelated. Loving the critic compels us to learn from him, which shows us our faults, which in turn enables us to correct them.

Several years ago, a person came to my office and bluntly criticized me. He said and I quote him, **“Your expectations of people are unrealistic and it frustrates them.”** He was referring to the things I preach about Christlikeness – about being like Jesus in the way we think, feel, and act. So, I practiced what I just preached.

First, I loved the critic. I was grateful that he cared enough about the congregation and me to say what he did and verbalized that to him.

Second, I learned from the critic. I tried to understand his criticism by asking questions. Can you give me examples of things I’ve taught that are unrealistic? What do you think the Bible teaches about those things? What do you mean by “frustrates them?” How do you know they’re frustrated? And what would you do differently if you were I? Once I understood his criticism, I assessed it. I reviewed *what I said* about Christlikeness to determine if it was consistent with Scripture and *how I said it* to determine if it was clear. I also tried to put myself in the shoes of the hearers. I imagined what I’d think and feel if were them.

And third, I corrected my fault. His criticism did reveal a fault of mine to me. I hadn’t made the role of intention in Christlikeness clear enough. Intention, not attainment, is the standard by which God judges us. The issue isn’t how much like Jesus *we are*. It’s how much like Jesus *we would be* if we intended it. Knowing that and its implications keeps

us from being frustrated in our discipleship to Jesus. But I hadn't emphasized that like I should or stated it precisely enough. So, I corrected my fault, which is why I talk so much now about intention.

You get the idea. We should be big when we're criticized. We should love the critic, learn from the critic, and correct our faults.

Criticism Is Normal and Valuable

That God's call and the verses I read reveal something we have to do in order to answer it. We have to think rightly about criticism. Those verses teach us two things we need to know about it.

First, criticism is normal. That's an underlying assumption of every verse I read today. All of us have been criticized hundreds of times before, thousands if we're married, and will continue to be. Criticism is a common, ongoing, and inescapable fact of life for us all.

It is that because the people around us sometimes don't know what they're talking about. I think of a Munich schoolmaster who said to his ten year-old student Albert Einstein, "**You'll never amount to very much**", or Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, which is one of the greatest and most loved operas ever written. The child's wasn't faulty. The critic was. The opera wasn't faulty. The critic was. The schoolmaster and Ferdinand simply didn't know what they were talking about. And sometimes, neither do the people around us.

Criticism is normal for another reason. It's because all of us are fallen and flawed. All of us have our faults, in other words, that can and sometimes should be pointed out. Here's an exercise you can do with a person you know well. Write down five of his or her faults and have him or her write down five of your faults. It won't be difficult believe me.

For those two reasons, criticism is normal. It doesn't mean that you and I are horrible, awful, or incompetent people. It just means that we're part of the human race. We're just one of the six billion fallen and flawed human beings who inhabit planet earth.

But criticism isn't just normal. It's valuable as well. Notice what

the psalmist writes in 141:5. He invites criticism because it's **"oil upon the head."** It's a blessing in other words. The wise man concurs in Proverbs 27:5-6, **"Better is open rebuke than love that conceals. Faithful are the wounds of a friend."** Friends telling us our faults is better than friends concealing them. Those verses make it plain. Criticism is valuable to us all.

It is so because it reveals our blind spots. There are negative diminishing things about all of us that we simply don't see. But criticism helps us see them. One writer says it this way: **"Criticism can help you fix mistakes and improve. I believe criticism can often show you what your own blind spots are, pointing out problems to you before they arrive. I've found it has given me an advantage in my own self-improvement."** He's right about that. Criticism is one of the most person and life improving resources we have.

I was talking with two people one time when A told B, **"You often speak with tones in your voice that alienate people."** It was a tense moment but a week or so later, B told me that he had been thinking about it and that A was right. He then went on to observe that he'd have been a lot better off if someone had told him that years ago. Criticism really is one of the most person and life improving resources we have.

So those are the two things about criticism that the verses I read teach. It's normal and valuable.

Conclusion

But very few people see it that way. As Christopher Hampton observes, **"Asking a person what he thinks about critics is like asking a lamppost how it feels about dogs."** Most people think that way and it's problematic they do. What we think determines what we feel and do. So, thinking wrongly about criticism favors evil. It makes us dread and reject it. But thinking rightly about it favors good. It makes us desire and receive it. So think rightly. Recognize that it's normal and expect it, and that it's valuable and welcome it. You'll be big if you do!