

Profiting from Criticism

LIFEFAITHFUSION DEVOTIONAL DAY FIVE

SCRIPTURE STUDY

Proverbs 10:17
Proverbs 13: 14
Proverbs 18:13
Proverbs 12:15
Proverbs 23:9
Jeremiah 23:6
Proverbs 16:1
Revelation 2 and 3

DIGGING DEEPER

True and false prophets were found throughout the Old Testament. We learn a great deal about the spiritual condition of a king by his response to prophetic criticism.

PRAYER FOCUS

Dear Jesus,
Help me to be discerning in evaluating criticism. Fill me with the Holy Spirit that I may see myself as Jesus sees me.
Amen



EVALUATING CRITICISM

People have different priorities and expectations; so evaluate criticism in light of your purposes and calling in life. Recognize that your critics can often see your blind spots objectively, and may be able to assist you with your personal issues. However, no one else can truly know your motives, goals, history and vision for the future. Criticism should be carefully considered, but when your attitude is right before God, He will give you the wisdom and discernment to respond wisely to the counsel offered to you. False prophets were prolific in Old Testament times. God would warn His people of impending judgment for their idolatry, and false prophets would come out of the woodwork to comfort the people and assure them they would not suffer consequences for their sin. Jeremiah, often called the weeping prophet, was severely persecuted and thrown into a cistern for criticizing Israel's idolatrous practices. Israel's monarchs would fill their courts with advisors who refused to confront God's people about their sins. However, God's true prophets gave a clear picture of His view of these lying soothsayers. Jeremiah penned these words in Jeremiah 23:6:

“This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD.” (NIV)

Is the person who offers criticism a spiritual person? Of course, we can benefit from criticism no matter who the source is, but it is as difficult for the courageous godly critic to give criticism as it is for you to receive it. Author Phillip Gulley, in his book *Hometown Tales* (p.36) concurs with this statement:

“Here’s a good test to know whether or not truth-telling springs from love. Truth will not only pain those who hear it; it will pain those who speak it. Sometimes truth brings tears. This is why some folks, despite being good people, will settle for niceness over truth. A poor trade. I think of love and truth as twins forever joined.”

- What is the most valuable criticism you have ever received? Who gave the criticism? Was it difficult for you to receive it? Did it seem to be difficult for them to give it?
- List three of the people you respect the most for their integrity and godliness. What character qualities do you observe in them? What have you learned from their words or actions about how to live your life?
- Spend some time praying for God to send you “accountability partners”—people from your Bible study, church, or family who can regularly be involved in your life and give you trustworthy counsel. Do you already know of someone (others) who could assume that role?

Jesus often assumed the role of lovingly evaluating the faith of others, and helped them onto the right path. An excellent example is found in Revelation chapters two and three, as he wrote letters to seven churches in Asia. To the church in Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-8), He warned them that they lost their first love, but they should repent and repeat the faith-walk they had when they first became believers. In Revelation 2:12-18, Christ commended them for courageously living in a place filled with wickedness and oppression. But he criticized them for tolerating pagan practices in their church. Christ spoke to the Christians in Thyatira and warned of a wicked woman in their midst who would leave young believers astray. He encouraged them to hold fast to their faith (Revelation 2:18-29). Jesus’ warning to Sardian Christians in Revelation 3:1-6 was more stern. The Savior said they were pretending to be spiritual on the outside, but were dead on the inside. He commended the faithful in Sardis who genuinely followed Him. In Revelation 3:7-14, Jesus affirms the loving spirit of the Philadelphian Christians and promises them heavenly rewards. Jesus administers a scathing rebuke for the complacency of the Laodecian Christians and warns them of eternal punishment. After His harsh words, however, He gives one of the most impassioned pleas to open the door to His knocking and to walk in intimacy with Him (Revelation 3:14-22). The stunning combination of clear criticism and hopeful encouragement is a wonderful model for us in giving criticism to others. We should be honest and direct in our words, but always encourage and give positive direction. Only Satan accuses and leaves his victims wounded and hopeless.

- Read Revelation 2 and 3 carefully. For what qualities did Jesus commend these churches? What sins did He denounce?
- How did He say these believers needed to change? What was His plan of action for each of them?
- On the back of this sheet, draw a line of your faith-journey from your conversion until now. Include high points and low points, as you would on a graph. Now, think about those high points. What was going on in your life at that time that caused a mountain-top experience? What about the low points? What circumstances could be attributed to that time? Are there any common denominators in those high or low times? What can you learn from these?

THE RIGHT RESPONSE

We can become teachable and discerning in receiving criticism. So how do we respond when someone criticizes us? King Solomon gives us several guidelines. He tells us to stop and look at the person. Focus carefully on what they are saying (Proverbs 10:17; 13:14). Listen to what they say and don't answer too quickly (Proverbs 18:13). Accept their perception as real and valid, even though it may be very different from your own (Proverbs 12:15). Resist the temptation to defend yourself or retaliate with accusations and labeling (Proverbs 23:9). Don't act like a fool by changing the subject or joking (Proverbs 10:8). Seek to understand what was really meant-and said. Restate the critic's words and feelings in your own words to ensure you are talking about the same thing (Proverbs 16:21). Let your wisdom show. Respond appropriately with humility and gratitude. Apologize when necessary. Carefully evaluate the criticism. If it is true, take it to heart and make appropriate changes. If it is false, disregard it. Ask God to give you a forgiving heart if you are having difficulty despising the messenger. God can speak through anyone, even Balaam's donkey! (Numbers 22:28-30)

King David responded quickly and earnestly to Nathan when he spoke of God's displeasure over the king's adulterous affair with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:13). David recognized immediately that Nathan's criticism was valid and should be heeded. The model prayer for David's godly sorrow and repentance is found in Psalm 51. The next time we are confronted with a sin in our lives, David's prayer is a wonderful way to pray to God concerning our sin, and to express our desire to be cleansed and restored. David's foolish son Absalom, sought to steal his father's kingdom. But Absalom's lack of discernment and unrepentant heart in following the advice of his cavalier peers ultimately caused his demise:

“Absalom and all the men of Israel said, "The advice of Hushai the Arkite is better than that of Ahithophel ." For the LORD had determined to frustrate the good advice of Ahithophel in order to bring disaster on Absalom.” 2 Samuel 17:14 (NIV)

Heeding wise counsel can save our lives. Ignoring it can destroy our lives. We must be sensitive, teachable and humble in hearing the admonishment of others. However, we must also carefully evaluate the criticism and the critic. God always convicts us of sin in specifics. Satan always accuses us in nebulous generalities. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit was sent to convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8-11). In other words, the Holy Spirit partners with us to help us listen to God and to others and to respond appropriately.

- Describe a time in your life when you received unjust criticism. How did you evaluate what was said? How did you respond to the critic? How do you think Jesus would have wanted you to respond?
- Which of these ways do you most often cope with challenges in your life: Self-reliance (I don't need anyone's help. I can take care of myself). Self-condemnation (Everything has to be my fault, I must be a bad person). Self-centeredness (It's your problem, I know what I'm doing.) How do you think God would want you to respond?
- How do you personally determine if the advice you receive is valid? What factors do you consider?
- How often do you offer criticism to someone else? Is it difficult to be truthful? Is it hard to “speak the truth in love?” Is it tough to separate your words from your emotions? Why or why not?

APPLYING THE SCRIPTURES

Read the following verses on responding to criticism and summarize them in your own words

Proverbs 10:17, Proverbs 13: 14, Proverbs 18:13, Proverbs 12:15, Proverbs 23:9, Proverbs 16:1