



RESPONDING TO CRITICISM

As we dive into listening this year, learning to listen to criticism might be our greatest challenge. But if we are going to remain in ministry, criticism is bound to come our way. And although critics are not always right, the Bible tells us repeatedly to listen to them (Proverbs 12:1; 19:20).

There are two opposing ways to respond to feedback. One is to close ourselves off to it. Hearing criticism is painful so it is tempting to try to avoid that painful emotion. Pride is a common pitfall here. We may convince ourselves the feedback is not true or make a mental list of all the faults of the other person. Instead of truly listening, we may focus on our strengths and the evidence that God is working through us.

This response is dangerous because it keeps us from growing. We all have weaknesses we are unaware of. We need others to help us see our faults.

Another possible response is to absorb the criticism too deeply and allow it to tell us something about our identity or calling. We begin to think that we are not good enough. We may feel ashamed or discouraged. This is also not God's intent. When God brings correction, it is to help us be even better leaders, trainers, or ministers. It might be a painful process, but the ultimate goal is to strengthen us in our calling and identity.

Instead of a prideful response or a shame-filled response, we want to approach criticism with openness while being secure in our identity in Christ. We want to seek growth while knowing that we are dearly loved children of God.

Devotional Study

SEPTEMBER

Responding To Criticism

1) Read Proverbs 12:15, 13:18, and 15:31-32.

What makes it hard to listen to criticism? How can we get better at receiving helpful feedback?

2) The life of David and Saul are a picture of why an appropriate response to feedback is so important. Saul was chosen as King first. And his sins seemed more minor than the sins of David - doing the sacrifice himself when the priest didn't show up to do it versus adultery and murder (1 Samuel 13-15; 2 Samuel 11). Yet his response when his sin was pointed out made the difference. When Samuel confronted Saul he lied, minimized, and blamed others. Whereas David confessed. Saul lost power and David was anointed as God's chosen King. Read Psalm 141:5. What do you think David's words here mean in light of what you know about his life?

Criticism from others rarely feels like soothing medicine or oil. What are the things that make it hard for you to receive criticism in this way?

3) When David went to fight Goliath, he received criticism from his older brother and from King Saul. Read 1 Samuel 17:26-37. What do you notice about David's response to the pushback he received?

How is this response different from the way he responded to Nathan (1 Samuel 12)? Why do you think David responded differently in these two situations?

4) In reality not all criticism is life-giving reproof. Some might be an unfair attack on our character or just bad advice. In David's response to Saul, (v. 34-37), he lists his own history about defeating the bear and the lion and attributes his success to God. How do we strengthen ourselves in God and become more secure in our identity so that when unconstructive criticism comes our way we are not shaken?

How can we get better at discerning if the criticism we are hearing is helpful to build us up or just tearing us down? What do we do when we determine the feedback is not constructive?

Have you had experience of either type of feedback and how did you discern how to respond? Looking back, what might you have done differently?

5) Who is someone in your life that you can ask for feedback from? What's one area where it would be wise to seek feedback?

Finally, here are some practical tips to help us respond to criticism.

In the moment:

1. **Repeat back.** After listening, repeat back what you heard in your own words to make sure you understand.
2. **Thank the person** for sharing the feedback and let them know you will think about it. It is common to feel emotional when receiving criticism, so it is often better not to respond immediately but to take time and process. You can say, 'Thank you so much for talking to me about this. I would like to take time to think about what you said and bring it before God.'
3. **Apologize** if needed. At times, your weaknesses will cause others hurt. Be quick to apologize when your actions have hurt someone.

After the fact:

1. **Ask God to show you what is true.** The entire rebuke may be true. It might all be false. Or there may be small pieces of truth. Ask God, then pause and listen with an open heart.
2. **Talk to a mentor to get an outside perspective.** Someone who knows you well can help you see what is true.
3. **Choose to let go of the things that are not true.** Don't let the criticism bring discouragement. You may need to forgive the person who criticized you and let go of bitterness, anger, and hurt. If something was said that does not seem true, put it out of your mind and choose not to dwell on it.
4. **Make appropriate changes.** Be proactive about responding to what God is revealing to you. A mentor can help you know what steps to take to address the criticism. And God can give you the strength to change!

Summary

Take time to pray for each other. We all face criticism and need God's grace to stay humble and strengthened in our work.