



# **Bible & Life**

## **Bible Teaching Newsletter**

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## ***How To Deal With Criticism***

*by David Dunlap*

One of the greatest tests in the Christian life is how to respond to criticism. If you are going to be a leader, then criticism is part of the job description. You can be a loving Christian, you can be a wonderful godly leader, but you will be criticized no matter what you do. There is no such thing as going forward for God without opposition. Moses faced criticism, John the Baptist faced criticism, and our Lord Jesus Christ faced criticism. If you are going to lead—in fact, if you are going to live—you are going to be criticized. Comedian Bill Cosby once said, “I don’t know the key to success, but the key to failure is trying to please everybody.” A recurring problem in many assemblies, Bible studies, Bible camps, and Christian ministries is that they have been trying to please everyone. There is a very real sense in which you cannot serve effectively until you know how to handle criticism.

You may even be a little discouraged right now, because every time you step out and try to do something, you are criticized. Some of you might even have stepped back from serving in the local church because you are tired of the heat. You never knew what you were signing up for. How can you effectively deal with criticism? Nehemiah was a leader who was tested, criticized, attacked, and betrayed, yet rose above it all to serve God effectively. Let us look at four principles found in the book of Nehemiah.

### **1. Do Not Be Overly Sensitive to Criticism**

*“Sanballat was very angry when he learned that we were rebuilding the wall. He flew into a rage and mocked the Jews, saying in front of his friends and the Samaritan army officers, ‘What does this bunch of poor, feeble Jews think they are doing?’” (Nehemiah 4:1-3 NIV)*

In the verses above we discover our first principle: Don’t be overly sensitive to criticism. Expect it. It is guaranteed that no matter what decision you make and no matter what actions you take, you will be criticized. It’s just a fact. There is not a person in the Bible that did anything for God that was not criticized. If Jesus was criticized, you will be criticized too. Why will you be criticized? Allow me to illustrate. The elders of a local church decided they would like to have a number of evangelistic events in the coming year, and scheduled a planning meeting. A young believer decided he would attend this meeting and suggest an idea for outreach. He researched his idea before the meeting. He talked to others that were his own age and to the elders in his local assembly. The time of the meeting arrived, and he was excited to share his idea. Ten people attended the meeting, and after he outlined his idea, many were in favor of it; in fact, most were very excited about it. Yet one individual strongly opposed the

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***“We must give up the vain idea of trying to please everyone. The thing is impossible, and the attempt is a mere waste of time. We must be content to walk in Christ’s steps, and let the world say what it likes. Do what we will, we will never satisfy it (world/critics), or silence its ill-natured remarks.”***

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**J. C. Ryle**  
(1816-1900)

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idea. This opposition almost derailed his good idea for gospel outreach. Sadly, in many cases, criticism does impede many good efforts. This serves to emphasize an important fact in the Christian life: You can always count on at least 5-10% opposing you no matter what you do.

Why will you be opposed? For one thing, vision and zeal are very easy to criticize. It is easy to poke holes in good ideas, it is easy to criticize. It is easier to tear down than to build up. Nehemiah had a God-given vision, and vision attracts criticism. To make it worse, vision is very difficult to defend against criticism. A cynic will always be able to poke holes in spiritual vision— even a God-given vision.

Additionally, you will be criticized because your decisions and your actions are going to be a threat to someone else. Sanballat and Tobiah had a vested interest. They did not want the walls of Jerusalem to be rebuilt. Sometimes you will step toes and challenge someone's vested interest. Leadership, by definition, is about change, and change is inherently a threat to people. Unfortunately, you will probably offend someone almost every time you lead or serve.

On the other hand, there are times we deserve heart-felt criticism. A godly elder once said "Sometimes, your worst critics are your best critics." At times we deserve the criticism that we receive.

## **2. Do Not React Too Quickly to Criticism**

It doesn't take long before a serious Christian meets those who oppose his efforts. Soon after Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, he encountered Sanballat and Tobiah, both of whom would be his most vocal critics. Very early in his ministry, we read of the character and efforts of these men:

*"But when Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem the Arab heard of our plan, they scoffed contemptuously. "What are you doing, rebelling against the king like this?" But I replied, "The God of heaven will help us succeed. We are his servants will start rebuilding this wall. But you have no stake or claim in Jerusalem"(Nehemiah 2:19-20).*

Who were Sanballat and Tobiah? They were enemies of Israel and enemies of God. That is all that Nehemiah needed to know when he faced their criticism. If they opposed God, of course they were going to criticize Nehemiah. Do not act too quickly to criticism. When you do act, act calmly and fairly, motivated by godly desires. Knowing the source of the criticism and the character of the critic is very important in handling criticism correctly. Learn to recognize that some people are naturally critical. However, we should watch that we don't disregard criticism simply because it comes from a disagreeable person. Once in a while that contrary individual will be correct in what he says.

Farmers will tell you that 95 percent of the seed they plant is good, and 5 percent is bad. This is just a fact of agriculture and the nature of seeds. But this fact does not stop farmers from planting their crops. The same also applies to people that you meet in the local church. You can trust 95 percent of the people; the other 5 percent are critical, gossipy, and just plain hard to work with. Like farmers, this 5 percent should not stop us from pouring ourselves into the work of God. Don't let your service for the Lord be ruled by the 5 percent, but rather by the 95 percent.

Bible teacher H. A. Ironside (1876-1951) once pointed out what he called the "arithmetic" of heaven in the Book of Acts. "The Lord added to the church; Believers were multiplied." Ironside noted that every church will have people that will choose to come and help the work of God; they are the

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***"Be not rash  
with your mouth,  
nor let your  
heart be hasty to  
utter a word  
before God, for  
God is in Heaven  
and you are on  
earth. Therefore  
let your words be  
few. For a dream  
comes with much  
business, and a  
fool's voice with  
many words."***

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**Ecclesiastes 5:2-3**

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“blessed additions.” Then there are others who are difficult and they choose to leave the church—these are the “blessed subtractions.” He may have been a little bit blunt, but he was right. Every church will have its critics. For every critic that moves on, it seems that another comes to replace him or her. But don’t allow criticism to derail the work of God. Remember the source of the criticism will often tell you more than the criticism itself.

### **3. When There Is Criticism— Try To Resolve It**

*“I prayed, ‘Hear us, O our God, for we are being mocked.’”* (Neh. 4:4-5)

The first step in resolving criticism is prayer. Twice in this wider passage, Nehemiah prays. Nehemiah, frankly, was very upset. When he prayed, he didn’t hold back how he really felt. He was very transparent with the Lord. Notice also that no time elapsed between the criticism and the prayer. A good leader knows his weaknesses and his limitations. Nehemiah knew that, if he was going to be successful in his efforts in Jerusalem, he needed the wisdom of God immediately.

Why is it so important to pray when you are criticized? Well, for one thing, it is usually better to tell God how you really feel than to tell your critic. God can provide the wisdom you need amid your frustrations, your hurts, your wounds. In prayer, God can strengthen you for the battle ahead. It’s better to let God have your load. Proverbs 26:4 says, “When arguing with fools, don’t answer their foolish arguments, or you will become as foolish as they are.” What is the alternative? When you are ridiculed, don’t take it out on people, but bow before the Lord in prayer.

The second step is to discern if the criticism has any validity. Ask God for His verdict. Allow God to make you sensitive to any truth that may be in the criticism, and help you to ignore the rest. It’s only when God makes the truth known that one’s own sense of pride is subdued.

I once read that L.L. Bean, the popular clothing company, uses this formula: there are 25 unreported complaints for every one that is sent to the company. Do not dismiss criticism too quickly before you have prayed about it. Multiply every criticism you hear by about 25. That’s reality. Ask God in prayer, “What can I learn from this criticism?”

The third step toward resolution is to make sure that your primary goal is to please God alone. If we are honest, most of us are “people pleasers.” We all love others to love us. Nehemiah wasn’t serving for the applause of people; he was serving for the applause of God, and God alone. Your real goal in life and in ministry should not be to please other people. You should play to an audience of one. Your goal is to please God.

J. C. Ryle, the godly writer and expositor of Scripture once wrote:

*“We must give up the vain idea of trying to please everyone. The thing is impossible, and the attempt is a mere waste of time. We must be content to walk in Christ’s steps, and let the world say what it likes. Do what we will, we will never satisfy it (world/critics), or silence its ill-natured remarks. It first found fault with John, the Baptist and then with the blessed Master. And it will go on caviling and finding fault with the master’s disciples so long as one of them is left on the earth.”<sup>1</sup>*

Aim to please God and God alone. How should you respond to criticism? Expect it. Remember the source. Pray about it. Seek to resolve it.

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***“I have lived long enough to discover that there is nothing perfect in this world. If you are to wait till you find a perfect preacher or the perfect church, I am afraid you will have to wait till the millennium arrives. What we want is to be looking up to Christ. Let us be done with faultfinding.”***

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**D. L. Moody  
(1834-1899)**

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Bible & Life Ministries, Inc.  
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#### Correspondence should be sent to:

BIBLE & LIFE Newsletter  
c/o David Dunlap  
3116 Gulfwind Drive  
Land O' Lakes, FL 34639  
(813) 996-1053

#### e-mail

daviddunlap@earthlink.net

#### web site

www.bibleandlife.org

#### Facebook

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Bible-Life/139555992799868>

### 4. Forgive, Forget, and Keep on Working

Nehemiah had three choices when he was peppered with rumors, resistance, and ridicule. He could: 1) Give up; 2) Leave the wall and execute a preemptive strike; or 3) Keep on working. What did Nehemiah choose? In Nehemiah 4:6 we read, "At last the wall was completed to half its original height around the entire city, for the people had worked very hard." He chose to forgive, forget, and continue to work. By responding this way, Nehemiah avoided a common mistake associated with criticism. He didn't allow his enemies to become the focus of his attention. He defended himself, yes, but he remained steadfast in his vision in spite of the criticism his team received.

When we are criticized, how do we normally respond? We are usually tempted to begin a dialogue with our critics, or even with those who are simply parroting their criticism. We waste time, energy, and thought trying to answer questions for people who really are not interested in answers. Without realizing it, we shift our attention away from the work God has given us and allow ourselves to become critic-centered.

We never leave the wall to fight the enemy. We could spend all our time putting out fires and never get the job done. We could spend all our time applying oil to the squeaking wheel (the critic, the complainer) and never succeed in what God has called you to do.

Don't let criticism distract you. Learn to expect it. Learn to pray about it, to learn if it is valid, and most of all, to work through it. Persistence is the ultimate test of leadership; it is the acid test. How do you handle criticism when the going gets tough? The secret of success is to simply outlast your critics. How does an acorn get to be an oak tree? It grows by relentlessly driving its roots deep into the soil and spreading its branches toward the sun. There is nothing the devil would rather do than to stall you, stop you, and move you into neutral. Believer resist this temptation and keep on living for Him.

### Endnotes

1. J. C. Ryle, *Commentary of Luke, Vol. 1*, (Banner of Truth: Carlisle, PA, 1986), p. 320