

Harnessing Criticism to Refine Not Destroy Us

Lesson 12

GROW DISCIPLESHIP CURRICULUM

Engaging the Learner

“Travis Graham: Vice-President for Youth Apparel.” The leather-and-wood chair creaked as Travis leaned back, staring at the sign. The title beside his name seemed to mock him, much as his increasingly vocal employees did. Six months into “Phase 1,” his bold plan to reverse the slump in the 12-17 year-old division of Adonis Action Wear, Travis wondered if he’d be around to see Phase 2. He’d been promoted from Design to rescue a flailing youth segment burdened with steep losses, high overhead, an unwieldy and time-intensive planning structure, and an aging design team apparently no longer able to attract young customers. Upon arriving, Travis moved quickly to cast a vision for change and simplify procedures. In response, morale rose, and Travis was praised by peers and employees alike.

However, faced with increasing losses, Travis was soon forced to cut wages and benefits, and begin a tough series of demotions, transfers, and firings. While many of his leadership team supported the changes, a vocal handful, some tied to the old VP, increasingly criticized his strategies and decisions. Travis had been able to hold his detractors at bay until the third quarter’s numbers had come in today. With no increase in profits or earnings, his critics had exploded.

“You’ve cut my salary and transferred a twenty-five year member of the design team just to show your power!” exploded Brad. “You don’t care about anyone but yourself and your beautiful stock options.” Connie had been more blunt, if slightly more controlled. “I’ve never seen more blunders in one quarter. If you aren’t replaced by the end of this week, I’m walking.” On top of the oral denunciations, the stream of e-mails sent by the less daring or more crass clogged his inbox. Travis fought to control his rage and humiliation. A believer, he tried to remember a scripture passage for guidance, but nothing came. Finally, he bent his head in a prayer for guidance and help.

Exploring the Lesson

“You can please some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time, but you can’t please all of the people all of the time.” This famous saying of Abraham Lincoln is a truism we all come to realize. Criticism from others is simply a fact of life. The question is: As Christians, how should we deal with criticism? In Exodus 14:10-16, Moses is faced with the criticism of the children of Israel as he is leading them to the Promised Land. The criticism he receives and his response to it serves as an example to us as to how we should respond to critiques from others. Take a moment to read this passage before continuing.

Criticism is Part of Life

The exodus of the Israelites from Egypt is the foundational event for Israel as a people. This event defines both their understanding of God and their relationship with Him. Throughout the Old Testament, they return to this act of love and redemption as they attempt to understand God and His actions. In Egypt, the Israelites had been slaves, denied education, obligated to practice brutal population control methods, and forced to make bricks for the construction of the pyramids. They called out to God for a deliverer. Under God’s direction, Moses came to Pharaoh to demand their release. In negotiating a

release for the Israelites, Moses succeeded without a single blow being landed in a revolutionary war. Even after God had proved repeatedly that He would protect the Israelite people, when Pharaoh's army gave chase, the Israelites venomously criticized Moses.

"Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die?" they asked. "Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians?' It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert" (Exodus 14:11-12). Moses, historically the foremost Jewish prophet and leader, dealt with bitter criticism in what should have been his triumphant hour. If Moses faced such opposition, we can safely assume we'll receive a healthy dose of criticism as well. We can draw several conclusions about criticism from this passage.

When people criticize us, they are shifting the responsibility for difficult situations to other people. In this instance, the Israelites reacted as though they never wanted to leave Egypt—it was Moses' fault. Those who criticize also begin questioning motives. The Israelites asked Moses if he'd lead them out of Egypt because there were no graves there. We can expect people to question our motives when they are criticizing, no matter how pure our motives may have been. Expect popularity and appreciation to fade in the face of obstacles. Moses experienced this flip-flop repeatedly during his leadership. We can expect the same. Finally, leaders will always face criticism, no matter how strong their leadership—even when they are following the commands of God.

Love and Understand Your Critics

How are we to react to our critics? Moses' response is telling. He does not call them "liars" or question their integrity or courage. Instead, he begins in verse 13 by saying, "Do not fear." Moses understood that people who criticize are usually fearful, not bad people. The unkind critic usually has a problem with him or herself. Furthermore, the basis for all negative criticism is mistrust. Instead of planning a verbal counterattack, Moses lovingly addresses the underlying issue—in this case, fear. If we are to respond to our critics as Christians, we must first love them. Remember, love sometimes precedes our understanding.

Absorb the Criticism

"Stand firm," continues Moses, "and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today" (14:13). Even while Moses begins to paint a vision for the future, it becomes obvious that he will not strike back. The fact is we often have to absorb criticism while not addressing it. To become defensive yields no profits. Blaming others never solves the problem. Generally, if you are being criticized, resolve to take it, forgiving the criticizer and focusing on love.

Talk to God About the Criticism

Although Exodus does not record for us exactly what Moses said to God, God's response in 14:15 is telling. God asks Moses, "Why are you crying out to me?" While Moses refused to lash out at his critics, he was evidently not quiet before God. Even as you are criticized, know that you can always come to God with the criticism. God willingly listens to our depressed spirits. However, as is apparent in this passage, God can get tired of our whining. So, lay your complaint before God and then be open to God's suggested solutions.

Receive Directions from the Lord

After admonishing Moses, God gave direction. "Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground." Moses prayed to God when the Israelites assailed him with criticism, and God worked a miracle on his behalf. God has solutions, but we have to be ready to act on them. He usually chooses to work through people. If we pray for help when we are criticized, we must be ready for God to work through us. The passage also shows us that there are obstacles even in the pathway of God's plans.

Enhancing Our Lives

Critics will assail us in our lives. As Christians, we are known, not by criticism, but in how we respond to it. The following suggestions will allow you to respond to criticism in a Christ-like manner.

How to cope with criticism.

1. Accept criticism as a part of life. No one is exempt.
2. Realize some positions, especially positions of leadership, are more inclined to be criticized. Ask yourself: "Am I willing to pay the price in criticism this job requires?" If you are not, don't accept the position or plan to make any changes.
3. Refuse to deal incorrectly with criticism. Incorrect responses include:
 - A. Denying your hurt by saying, "I'm used to it," or "I have thick skin."
 - B. Avoiding actions that might lead to criticism to the point of being held in bondage by the opinions of others.
 - C. Letting it eat you up with feelings of bitterness, anger, and alienation.
 - D. Trying to scheme how you can insult or hurt the other person.
 - E. Quarreling or arguing with your critic.
 - F. Telling others you were wronged or hurt.
4. Discuss openly and honestly the point upon which you were criticized (this should be done only if further information would satisfy your critic). As long as people are misunderstanding your actions, you will be criticized. So clarification is often necessary. As a leader, your job is to make sure communication is clear with both parties.

How to love and understand your critic. Loving those who attack you is never easy. The following steps can help you in this endeavor.

1. Determine you will love your critic. Love is not as much a feeling as it is a choice you make. You may not have good feelings toward the person, but you can't cherish ill will. The old saying, "Never judge a man until you have walked a mile in his shoes," applies here. You don't know what your critics are going through in other aspects of their life and how these circumstances affect their behavior. By loving him or her first, you are opening yourself up to understanding later.
2. Analyze what actions you took that were perceived as threatening. Seek to know what caused fear in your attackers.
3. Examine yourself through the eyes of your critics. Are some of the criticisms valid?
4. Express appreciation for the strengths of your critics.
5. Commit yourself to an act of kindness toward those attacking you. Remember your goal is not to disprove the criticism, but to achieve your objectives.

How to absorb criticism. As much as we'd like criticism to "roll off our back," our first response is always counterattack. The following steps can help you absorb the barbs of your attackers.

1. Get sufficient rest during time of high criticism. Your emotional well-being and your perceptions are tied to your physical well-being. Even Jesus took vacations to allow his body to recover!
2. Realize God does not forbid you to have enemies. He only instructs you to love them. If you do what is right, you will make enemies.
3. Always be open to learning. Ask yourself, "Is there anything I can learn from this?" While criticism always hurts, the deepest cuts come when there is some truth in it. Use these criticisms as a means to develop your personality and correct mistakes and flaws. By capitalizing on the criticism to make changes, you will turn something negative to your advantage, ultimately strengthening your cause.
4. If there is no validity to the criticism, refuse to dwell on it.

How to talk to God about criticism. Prayer is our primary recourse when we're criticized. The following tips allow you to fully realize this resource.

1. Pray as soon after the criticism as possible. Prayer removes the temptation to talk to others about the conflict and lessens the chance you will dwell on the injury, cultivating ill will. Plus, you'll feel better after you've talked about it.
2. Pray out loud. Praying aloud gives you a chance to vent your true feelings. Plus, hearing your words

gives you a reading on yourself.

3. Tell God bluntly how you feel. God can handle any violent feelings you may be having. You can tell God anything in any way. He won't be offended if you yell or cry, and He won't "teach you a lesson" when you are honest with him.

4. When you are finished, give God a chance to talk to you.

5. Ask God to heal your injured emotions.

6. Ask God to help you profitably use the criticism in your life.

7. Pray for the person who criticized you, looking for areas of need in his or her life and asking God to love him or her through you.

8. Finish your prayer time dwelling on other areas, perhaps the blessings God's given you or His grace and kindness.

How to receive direction from the Lord. When we are hurt or angry from criticism, the most difficult task can be listening to and following God's direction. After you have plainly expressed your feelings to God, use this plan to open yourself to God's leading.

1. Ask: Am I willing to do anything God wants me to do in this matter?

2. Affirm in your heart that, with God's help, you can handle any situation.

3. Explore all options available to you.

4. Sort out the best solutions to your situation.

5. Pray over these solutions.

6. Commit to overcoming evil with good.

7. Allow God to direct your actions and attitudes.

8. Do what seems to you to be the right thing.

Outline for Small Group Discussion or Personal Reflection

All questions and exercises are useful for either personal or small group reflection. While exercises marked with an asterisk (*) are written specifically for a small group leader, individual learners can easily modify the exercise for their personal study.

Engaging the Learner

Have you ever gone through a time of intense criticism on the job? What was the cause? How did you respond?

*Ask class members to list times when they have been extremely critical of their job or church leadership. How did those leaders respond?

Exploring the Lesson/Enhancing Your Life

*Ask someone to read Exodus 14:10-16 to the class.

Criticism is part of life

Why do people criticize others?

What can we expect to happen in the face of obstacles?

*Making notes on a dry erase board, ask class members to share times when they have struggled to respond in a Christ-like way to criticism. Beside each instance, note how the class member responded. (Do not erase this exercise. We will be returning to it.)

Love and understand your critics

What is the basis for negative criticism?

*Ask your class members if they handled the criticisms listed on the dry erase board with love. Determine if fear was the primary cause of the criticism. Then ask them how they could have shown love to their critics. Note the answer on the board.

Absorb the criticism

What positives come from becoming defensive or retaliating in response to criticism?

Have you ever absorbed harsh criticism? Was it easy or difficult? Are you glad you responded in that way?

Talk to God

When should we pray about the criticism we've faced?

*Have a prayer time in this part of your class. Encourage class members to pray regarding the instances listed on the dry erase board, even if they are in the past. In particular, tell God how the criticism felt and pray for the critics. If the conflict has not resolved itself, allow class members a specific time to pray for direction.

Receive Directions

What were God's directions for Moses in Exodus 14:10-16? What would have happened if Moses had not listened for God's response to his complaints?

* **In closing**, consider options for handling the criticisms dealt with in class. As a class, decide which option is most godly.