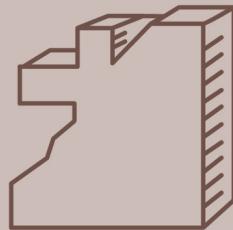


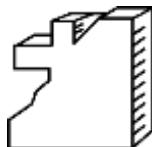


# HOW TO HANDLE CRITICISM - GROWING THROUGH FEEDBACK



JAMIE SOUTHCOMBE

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# INTRODUCTION

“This just isn’t good enough; you’ll need to rework the whole thing.” Those words stung when I first heard them, but I knew they were true. I was a trainee accountant and had handed a piece of work to my line manager that I knew wasn’t my best. His words were firm, but fair. And after reworking the whole spreadsheet, I had learned a valuable lesson: to work harder on a project before handing it to my superior. That moment would later shape my understanding of how to handle criticism, not merely by reacting emotionally, but by learning and improving through it.

You don’t have to live long to experience some kind of criticism. And it doesn’t always feel kind, and it isn’t always fair. Sometimes it’s justified, often not, and normally it’s a mixture of the two. But one thing is sure: we will all face some sort of criticism in our lives. Which is why learning how to handle criticism with humility, biblical wisdom, and emotional maturity becomes so important.

So, the question is, how will we respond when criticism comes our way? And, my friend, it will. Whether the remarks are fair or unfair, gentle or blunt, we must consider how to handle criticism in ways that honor God and shape our character.

First, let’s consider a definition of criticism. Criticism is words spoken that highlight a real or perceived flaw in someone or their activity.

And understood this way, criticism is usually considered inherently negative. Something to be avoided at all costs. Which is why most of us naturally shy away from criticism. We long to hear words of affirmation, rather than words that tell us we need to improve. After all, who wants to focus on what we’ve done wrong or have an awkward conversation with someone else about their failings?

But I want to argue that whilst criticism can be negative, it can also be redeemed. That is, we can highlight a flaw in someone or their activity in a godly way that is for their good. And what’s more, even ungodly criticism can-in grace-be used by God to mature us so that we grow in Christlikeness. Understanding how to handle criticism gives us a framework for growth rather than anxiety or defensiveness.

The goal of this life skill guide, then, is to help equip you when you face words of criticism and prepare you for the times when you have to give

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them. My aim is to provide you with tools to help you identify different types of criticism and offer ways to respond with wisdom, grace, and truth.

### ***Roadmap***

This life skills guide will be divided into five parts. First, we'll set our expectations right, so we're not surprised when criticism comes. Second, we'll consider different types of criticism. Third, we'll consider how to process godly critique. Fourth, we'll identify ways to deal with ungodly criticism. Finally, we'll look at how to handle criticism when you are the one called to offer it to others, doing so with gentleness and clarity.

Let's delve in:

# EXPECT CRITICISM

*Praemonitus, praemunitus.* If your Latin is a bit rusty, that means, “To be forewarned is to be forearmed.” The phrase originates from 16th-century UK military warfare. But it’s a phrase that also rings true for other areas of our lives, including the grenades of critique that will fly our way.

The point is-without adopting a posture of continual defensiveness-we can prepare our hearts to receive and give criticism. The first step in being prepared is to consider where criticism comes from and to trace its biblical roots. Understanding how to handle criticism before it arrives helps us respond with wisdom instead of surprise.

Now, at the outset, we need to recognise that the word criticism is not actually in the Bible. However, criticism in the Bible appears through related concepts. Scripture has a lot to say about the idea of constructive criticism, which it refers to using terms like “rebuke” and “correction.” Meanwhile, ungodly responses-such as “grumbling” and “complaining”—stand in for destructive critique. These themes give us a framework for what we might call biblical criticism, helping us discern godly correction from sinful fault-finding. Throughout Scripture, we also see numerous examples of both types of critique, which serve as a form of lived theology more than formal definition.

And while scholars later identified categories such as the four types of biblical criticism (historical, literary, form, and redaction criticism), for our purposes, it is more practical to observe how God’s people model correction, accountability, and rebuke. When godly critique appears in Scripture, it often carries the essence of constructive criticism-spoken for growth, repentance, and spiritual maturity.

But let’s first see where criticism comes from, its root. And to do so takes us right back to the beginning-to the Garden of Eden.

In the beginning, God created all things, and the Bible is clear that God created all things good (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). God’s creation climaxes in his making the first humans. After creating Adam and Eve, God declared everything to be “very good” (Gen. 1:31). All was well, and there was

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nothing and no one to criticise. There was nothing that needed improvement or that would be bettered by some extra advice.

And yet that soon changed. The first words of critique came from Satan's mouth as he tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God. In Genesis 3, Satan gave a (not so) veiled criticism of God's command to the first couple. Satan sought to criticise God by arguing that he was withholding goodness from Adam and Eve. How was God doing so? By not permitting them to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Tragically, Adam and Eve sided with Satan's critique of God and took and ate the fruit. The moment Adam and Eve disobeyed, sin entered the world. And a world that had only known beauty, goodness, and delight was now subjected to harshness, cruelty, and the possibility of and need for critique. From that point forward, humanity would need to learn how to handle criticism, both received and given, because brokenness guaranteed its existence.

And as we continue in the biblical storyline, it doesn't take long for criticism to spread. In fact, immediately when God comes to hold Adam to account, Adam criticises Eve (and even God!) in his "defence." "The man said, 'The woman you put here with me-she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it'" (Gen. 3:12). This moment offers one of the earliest narrative examples of criticism in the Bible, revealing how sin twists correction, blame, and personal responsibility.

As the Scriptures continue, we also encounter Bible verses about criticism, many of which address rebuke, correction, and accountability (Prov. 27:5; Prov. 9:8; Matt. 18:15; 1 Tim. 5:20). These passages remind us that godly rebuke is a gift, while ungodly criticism is a spiritual danger. Learning the difference allows us to recognise constructive criticisms as a pathway to growth.

And ever since Genesis 3, there have been people and things to criticise. And a whole heap of people who have been happy to provide criticism.

Criticism of all sorts, then, finds its source in sin. And that's worth thinking more deeply about. So, let's just double-click on that truth for a moment.

We should expect criticism because we are sinful, and because every human relationship is affected by brokenness. But through biblical wisdom, maturity, and awareness, we can develop discernment in how to handle criticism-whether constructive, destructive, godly, or ungodly.

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First, we see that we should expect criticism because we are sinful. Sin's entrance into the world wasn't an isolated event. It didn't only affect one family. It has impacted us all. Sin is where we fail to live by God's standards. It includes the good that we should do but don't, and the wrong that we shouldn't do, but still do in a spirit of rebellion to God.

God asks us to love him with our heart, soul, strength, and mind and love others as ourselves (Matt. 22:37-39). Yet when we are honest with ourselves, we know that we do not obey what God requires of us. And that means we can rightly be criticised for a whole manner of things. In and of ourselves, we are flawed, and so are the things we do. This reality is what makes learning *how to handle criticism* a necessary life skill for Christians.

Now, all of us should be willing to admit our sinfulness. The problem is that sin deceives. We are often blind to our own sin, and so we don't always see the ways in which we harm others. This dynamic is expressed in Proverbs 12:15, which reminds us that "the way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice." Developing humility helps us learn *how to take criticism* instead of reacting defensively.

Furthermore, it's not just that we have the issue of our intentional sin, which leaves us open to critique, but also the unintentional consequences of our natural human limitations. In other words, we can do or say the right thing, even with right intentions, but still cause accidental harm to others. And so, even with good motives, we can still be legitimately criticised. Some people struggle because *they can't take criticism*, but Scripture calls us to receive correction wisely, even when it is uncomfortable.

No wonder, then, Paul commands us to consider ourselves with sober judgment (Rom. 12:3). This posture is emphasized several times in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs 12:1 says, "Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but whoever hates correction is stupid" and Proverbs 15:31-32 says, "Whoever heeds life-giving correction will be at home among the wise. Those who disregard discipline despise themselves, but the one who heeds correction gains understanding." These verses remind us that learning *how to handle criticism* is part of maturing in wisdom.

Criticism comes our way because of our sin and our natural limitations.

### ***We should expect criticism because others are sinful***

We are not only affected by the sin that comes from within our own hearts, but our hearts are also deeply affected by the sin committed against us. So yes, we should expect criticism because we are sinful, but we should also expect criticism because others are also sinful.

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Criticism can be fired from ungodly lips. It can pour out as an overflow of hearts that are full of jealousy, envy, and greed. Hurt people often seek to hurt people. And so, we shouldn't be surprised that the words we sometimes hear from others are not sincere attempts to help or correct, but words that seek to take down and wound. Understanding this helps us in *handling criticism* without internalizing every harsh word.

Jesus himself faced this kind of criticism. Remember that Jesus never did anything wrong. He always loved God and always loved his neighbour. Nothing he ever did or said was worthy of criticism. And yet, throughout his life, Jesus was never far from the harsh and cutting words of others as they commented on his life and work. We read in Luke 5:

Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” Luke 5:29-32

In this scene, Jesus was doing something right-reaching out to the outcasts and showing mercy—but though masquerading as a question, he was criticised by the Pharisees and teachers of the law for spending time with “the wrong people.” And when we read the New Testament, we see this wasn’t an isolated incident. Jesus gives us a model for *dealing with criticism*: he responds without retaliation and entrusts himself to God.

If Jesus was criticised, then we should not be surprised when we are too. And as followers of Jesus, we should expect greater criticism from the world. Listen to Jesus’s words in John 15:

*If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.* John 15:18-19.

In other words, there’s another reason why we might face criticism. Because we follow Jesus. The world hates Jesus, and we live for him. People won’t like it when our lives reflect the Lord Jesus and when we seek to speak his truth in his name. As the Apostle Paul said, “*In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*”

So, we’ve seen that the presence of sin in this world and indeed within the human heart is the source of criticism; that against us, and indeed from us. When we ask “*how do you take criticism?*” Scripture directs us toward humility, patience, and trust in God.

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### ***The gospel and criticism.***

But praise God, because of the gospel, we know that sin doesn't have the last word. We know that Jesus Christ came to die for sin—the great cause of all criticism.

Even when he was on the cross, accomplishing salvation for all who believe, Jesus faced the critique of sinners, who he was in the act of dying for. Those who saw him hanging on the cross sneered at him. They spat at him. And yet as he hung there, he was dying for the sin of all who would trust in him. Here's how Peter puts it and draws out implications for us today:

*To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. 'He himself bore our sins' in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; 'by his wounds you have been healed.' For 'you were like sheep going astray,' but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. 1 Peter 2:22-25.*

We see in these words a sea of grace and hope in the face of criticism. Our hope for all the criticism we have received and deserved, and the words of critique we have uttered, is found in the gospel. As Peter says in verse 24, Jesus bore our sins in his body on the cross so that we can be forgiven and cleansed of our sin.

Although we give God every reason to disapprove of the way we live our lives, his precious Son carried our mistakes to the cross. As the Lord Jesus hung on the cross, he didn't just hear the insults and criticism of the crowd; he faced the right and settled judgment of God. Why? So that we can be forgiven and healed of our sin, and that we can be restored to a living relationship with God, the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls.

And so, the gospel both assesses our hearts accurately, finding us flawed and marred by sin, but instead of condemning us, in Jesus, God lavishes his grace on us. He sees all our sin and yet in love has sent his son to redeem us and rescue us. He has rescued us from the harsh and unloving words we have spoken. He has rescued us from the overflow of bitterness, greed, and envy that comes out of our own mouths.

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And this means that our failures and sins don't define us. They don't have the last word; Jesus does. Our lives are hidden with Christ in God, and our identity in him is more central to who we are than the things we do or say.

And in Jesus, God is making us new. God can even redeem cutting words and help them to be used for our good. And he can redeem harsh, cutting lips to change them into constructive tools to fashion the image of his Son in us by the power of his Spirit. The gospel helps us with *handling criticism*, giving us courage, tenderness, and wisdom rather than insecurity or fear of constant criticism.

So, we've seen the background to criticism. And we've seen how criticism can stem from sin in us or sin in others.

With that foundation in place, we now ask—so how are we to respond to criticism? That's where we head next.

### ***Reflection Questions:***

1. In what ways does understanding that criticism ultimately stems from sin (ours or others) change how you view both giving and receiving it?
2. The gospel both exposes our sin and offers healing from it. How might this truth free us from defensiveness when we are corrected or confronted?

# 2

## WE SHOULD DISCERN DIFFERENT TYPES OF CRITICISM

My family lived in the US for three years for seminary before returning to our native England. Our time in the US was a cultural experience to remember, not least for living in a country where there are animals that can kill you with one bite! One sunny morning, I opened the front door to find a snake on our porch taking in some rays. Once I got over the shock, I sought to work out whether this was a harmless milk snake or a poisonous copperhead (why do they need to look so similar?!). For me, it took a while (and a Google search) to discern that this was the harmless sort, but no doubt for the experienced eye, it was easy to determine which was which. Knowing the difference, though, was crucial in order to know how to respond—whether to run or stay!

Like snakes, criticism comes in different forms, and we need to learn to discern which ones we are facing.

Before we think about how to handle criticism, it is essential to pause and identify whether what we are receiving is godly or ungodly. Many believers struggle not because they don't know how to handle criticism overall, but because they have never slowed down to ask a basic question: how do you handle criticism when you are still unsure which kind it is? Discernment must come first, because clarity helps us respond with greater wisdom, peace, and humility.

To help us distinguish these types of criticism, let's see some places where they show up in the Bible.

First, let's consider two examples of godly criticism or correction. The first is the prophet Nathan challenging King David after he had sinned greatly. The true story in the Bible is found in 2 Samuel 12.

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King David committed grave a sexual sin and then attempted to cover it up which resulted in him breaking most of the Ten Commandments. David was then confronted by the prophet Nathan. Now Nathan doesn't come at David straight on; he wisely tells a story to open David's eyes to the seriousness of his sin. And it works. Nathan's confrontation with David leads to David's repentance, as he declares after Nathan's confrontation, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Sam. 12:13).

David's repentance led to God immediately forgiving him (what grace!). However, earthly consequences remain for David and his family because of his sin. For our purposes here, though, we see Nathan giving David godly correction, which leads to repentance and forgiveness. He accurately spoke the truth to David, and he was restored.

A second example of godly criticism is Paul correcting Peter in Galatia. In Galatians 2, we read how Peter feared human opinion and therefore withdrew from table fellowship with other Christians. Paul realised that this wasn't a trivial issue of who you sat next to over lunch. No, it was behaviour that undermined the fundamentals of the gospel (Gal. 2:14). And so, Paul "opposed Pete to his face" (Gal 2:11). Here was godly criticism and it was public (Gal 2:14). Paul challenged Peter's actions and the implication from the letter (and the rest of the Bible) is that Peter accepted the correction from Paul and the integrity of the gospel was upheld.

We have here two examples of godly correction (one private, one public) from one believer to another regarding ways in which they were not acting in line with their profession of faith. The correction in both cases was driven by love for the person, sought to honour God, and uphold the truth of His word. The corrections were clear, specific, and intended to help a brother follow God more closely.

And this kind of correction and criticism is life-giving. Proverbs 27:5-6 says, *"Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses."*

And yet we also have examples in the Bible of ungodly criticism. One example of this is the Sons of Korah in Numbers 16.

In this story, we see a rebellion against Moses and Aaron during the Israelite's wandering in the wilderness. In Numbers 16, Korah, along with others, challenged Moses and Aaron's authority. Their words were highly critical of Moses,

*Then Moses summoned Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab. But they said, 'We will not come! Isn't it enough that you have*

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*brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness? And now you also want to lord it over us! Moreover, you haven't brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey or given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Do you want to treat these men like slaves? No, we will not come!"*

But their assessment was wrong. For starters, Moses had a clear mandate from God to lead the people, and what's more, it seems (see Ps. 106:16) that they weren't motivated by godly concern, but by jealousy and envy. Sadly, their open criticism led to their own destruction, not that of Moses. As chapter 16 goes on to recount, the earth opened and swallowed Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, while fire consumed the 250 men offering incense (Num. 16:31-35).

So, these are the different types of criticism. Godly criticism that leads to repentance and life and ungodly criticism that flows from hard, bitter hearts and leads to destruction. So, when we encounter criticism, one important first step is to discern whether it is godly or ungodly criticism.

Now this is easier said than done! We are not always told which is which! If only the earth would open up to swallow those who give ungodly criticism (though if this were the case, who of us would be left?!).

But whilst it may be hard to discern whether we are receiving godly or ungodly criticism, it is at the very least helpful to have these two categories in our mind.

But how do we do this?

Well, there is no easy answer to this question! But from the examples above, we can see that there are principles that distinguish godly from ungodly criticism.

Godly criticism seeks to love people and uphold truth, whereas ungodly criticism stems from a place of jealousy and selfish ambition. Godly correction aims to bring one in line with God's truth, whereas ungodly criticism seeks to undermine and harm others. Often, godly criticism is given in a way that is clear and humble, as opposed to defiant and accusatory.

Here's a helpful table to consider these characteristics and qualities of the different types of criticism we can encounter.

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Category	Godly Criticism	Ungodly Criticism
<b>Biblical Examples</b>	Nathan confronting David (2 Sam. 12); Paul correcting Peter (Gal. 2)	Korah, Dathan, and Abiram rebelling against Moses (Num. 16)
<b>Motivation</b>	Love for the person; honouring God; upholding truth	Jealousy, pride, rebellion, selfish ambition
<b>Intent / Goal</b>	To lovingly correct sin and restore relationship with God	To undermine, harm, or discredit others; self-promotion
<b>Tone and Manner</b>	Humble, clear, specific, (sometimes private, sometimes public)	Disrespectful, accusatory, defiant
<b>Focus</b>	Behaviour inconsistent with faith or truth	Personal attack or challenge to God-given authority
<b>Effect / Outcome</b>	Leads to repentance, forgiveness, and spiritual growth	Leads to division, judgment, and destruction
<b>Example Result</b>	David repented and was forgiven; Peter corrected behaviour	Korah's rebellion led to destruction
<b>Proverbs 27:5–6 Principle</b>	“Wounds from a friend can be trusted”—brings life	“Enemy multiplies kisses”—brings harm

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The assessment may take some time, and we need much wisdom to diagnose whether (and how much of) the words we are hearing fall into each category. But the task is worth doing before the Lord.

Let's now consider how we can deal with receiving both types of criticism, and then we'll turn to consider how we can best give godly criticism.

***Reflection Questions:***

1. Why is it important to recognise that not all criticism is the same, and how might that awareness change your initial reaction when someone critiques you?

# 3

## WE SHOULD WELCOME AND INVITE GODLY CRITICISM

The famous Hans Christian Anderson fairytale goes as follows. Once there was an emperor who cared for nothing but his appearance. Two cunning weavers came to him, claiming they could make a suit of clothes so fine that it would be invisible to fools and the unworthy. Eager to prove his wisdom, the emperor paid them handsomely. The weavers wove nothing, yet everyone-ministers, courtiers, even the emperor himself-pretended to see the magnificent fabric, terrified of being thought unfit for their positions. At last, the emperor paraded through the city in his “new clothes,” naked before his people. The crowd, bound by fear and pride, said nothing-until a small child cried out, “But he’s not wearing anything at all!” Only then did truth pierce the illusion.

It's a cautionary tale about the importance of having people around us who are willing to speak hard truths into our lives.

Like that emperor, we are tempted to surround ourselves with voices that flatter rather than correct. We crave affirmation, not honesty, and so we walk blind, clothed in delusion. But a godly critique -honest, humble, rooted in love - is like the child's voice: uncomfortable, yet freeing.

So, having distinguished the different types of criticism that we face, let's turn to consider our response when we receive them both. And first, we're going to consider how we should respond to godly criticism, or what the Bible describes as “correction” or “rebuke.”

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The headline here is that we should welcome godly criticism. We should seek to surround ourselves with those who fear God more than our approval, for better the sting of truth than the comfort of a lie.

This is the posture that the Bible calls us to adopt. Here's Solomon in Proverbs 9:

*Do not rebuke mockers or they will hate you; rebuke the wise and they will love you. Instruct the wise and they will be wiser still; teach the righteous and they will add to their learning - Proverbs 9:8.*

Here we see that wise people are open to godly criticism and indeed love it. The wise person in Proverbs 9 recognises that they are always in need of correction, that there are always ways in which they can grow, and so they welcome critique. The righteous recognise that others have insight that they can learn from. And so, where godliness is offered, it is to be welcomed.

And the Bible says we grow by listening to godly criticism and critique. Again, look at what Proverbs teaches us in chapter 19:20:

*Listen to advice and accept discipline, and at the end you will be counted among the wise.*

And again, in Proverbs 13:18:

*Whoever disregards discipline comes to poverty and shame, but whoever heeds correction is honoured.*

So, from these verses, we see that first we should seek to have hearts that are open to hearing godly correction. And remember the gospel is key here. Being rooted and grounded in the gospel means that we should be more ready to accept godly criticism and approach it with curiosity rather than defensiveness.

With that heart posture in place, how can we welcome and indeed invite godly criticism?

3 steps for us to follow here:

### **1) Ask questions**

First, we can ask questions about the feedback we receive, and even, if possible, the person correcting. For some readers, criticism is not occasional but relational: for example, someone may feel, "my husband always criticizes me," and become overwhelmed by constant feedback

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without clarity. In those situations, asking questions is not merely polite - it is a necessary tool for discernment. It can help you understand whether the criticism reflects genuine areas for growth, or whether it is shaped by stress, misunderstanding, or unresolved conflict.

Being grounded in the gospel gives us an openness to explore and ask good questions of both the criticizer and ourselves. Asking questions of the one critiquing you can help to avoid any misunderstanding. So, questions like,

- Could you provide a specific example of what you've identified?
- Are there any other ways you think I need to grow?
- How do you think this issue impacts those around me?

Now, I'm not saying asking these kinds of questions is an easy thing to do. They open us up to further criticism and can leave us feeling vulnerable. However, we must remember that the Bible states, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." And when done with curiosity and kindness, often there is great blessing from this kind of vulnerable question-asking.

Questions like these, asked from a position of gospel security, allow us to move towards greater understanding of ourselves. The answers act like a mirror: they can provide a greater degree of seeing ourselves for who we truly are.

However, we can also ask ourselves questions when we receive feedback like this. Instead of reacting defensively out of pride and seeking to protect our reputation or image, we can be curious about ourselves. And so, we can ask questions of ourselves, such as:

- What is God inviting me to change through this correction?
- What practical steps can I take towards repentance and growth?
- Has this feedback exposed other issues or deeper sin struggles in my life?

These questions are not ones to rush through. I'd suggest taking a good chunk of time and a journal to work through your answers to those questions when criticism comes your way.

In this way, we can respond to godly criticism with curiosity. By doing so, we grow in our understanding of ourselves and towards greater Christlikeness.

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### **Pray**

Second, when you receive godly criticism, one godly response is to pray. Prayer is where we can wrestle with God about our lives (see the Psalms). And when critique comes our way, taking it to the Lord in prayer is a way we can deal with it.

When godly correction comes your way, pray that God gives you a soft heart. Pray that God keeps you from defensiveness. Take to him the things that you are struggling to hear—things that might sting. Pray for the person who has given you feedback. Thank God for their willingness and love to provide such feedback. And pray that you would see their words as faithful wounds of a friend.

So, there are two good responses to correction or rebuke.

And yet, to navigate criticism well, I'm convinced we need to be *proactive*, not just *reactive*, in our approach. Instead of merely dealing with criticism that comes our way, we can grow by appropriately seeking out feedback from trusted people in different areas of our lives. So thirdly we should...

### ***Invite godly feedback***

Now this might seem crazy to you, but hear me out! There are many benefits to inviting appropriate, godly feedback in your life. Chiefly, that by inviting critique, you are tending to the health of your own heart.

You see, if we protect ourselves from all criticism, we run the risk of having hearts that are proud and hard. But by opening channels where godly criticism can be lovingly and humbly received, we can (by God's grace) look to keep our hearts soft and humble.

A pastor I know models this very well. Every Sunday evening, he gathers a group of people and they review the day's services. At the start of each session, he says, "The purpose of this time is to model giving and receiving godly encouragement and criticism". In this way, there is a channel where appropriate and measured criticism (and encouragement) can be given.

And this dynamic shouldn't be limited to ministry or the things we do. It can also be a great posture in our everyday lives. In our marriages, families, and workplaces, we can seek appropriate feedback from trusted people. For example, learning how to handle criticism at work often begins with proactively inviting skill-building feedback from supervisors or teammates, rather than waiting for stressful performance reviews. When feedback becomes a regular, humble practice, workplace correction feels less threatening and more like part of discipleship and growth.

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So, why don't you start with a godly friend or two who know you well, perhaps the person mentoring you? And express your desire to grow by inviting their feedback.

It would be unhelpful if you were to adopt this posture with everyone. It's important that you choose someone you are comfortable with, who knows you, and whom you trust. (If you don't have anyone like this at the moment, pray that God would give you someone in your life like this!). And to start there. And pray that you would be an instrument in God's hands for sharpening and correcting one another.

***Reflection Questions:***

1. When you next receive feedback or criticism, what would it look like for you to respond with curiosity rather than defensiveness?
2. Who in your life could you intentionally invite to offer honest, godly criticism — someone who will both encourage and challenge you to grow?
3. In what specific areas of your life (e.g., work, relationships, ministry) could you begin regularly asking for feedback and praying about what you hear?

# 4

## WE SHOULD SIFT UNGODLY CRITICISM

So we've considered how to respond to godly criticism. And truth be told, in many ways that's the easy bit! However, there will be times when criticism isn't godly and is focused more on taking you down rather than building you up.

How should we respond to this kind of criticism?

Perhaps the temptation would be to either criticise back and lob a few grenades of your own, or at the other end of the spectrum, to just run away (literally or metaphorically) and so avoid thinking or talking altogether. Either fight or flight. There may be occasions when it's right to respond, and there will be times when removing yourself from a situation is wise. But only after you have done some work on your own heart.

So, here are five steps to considering ungodly criticism:

### **1) Pause**

The first thing we should do in this situation is pause. James says in 1:19-20, "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires."

James's advice when we want to respond in anger is to pause. To be quick to listen, and slow to speak. How many arguments and fights could have been saved through listening to James's advice here? As Proverbs 10:19 says, "When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent."

One of the benefits of pausing before responding is that we can have more time to consider what has been said, especially if we struggle with how to

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handle criticism without reacting impulsively. And specifically, whether the person offering criticism knows us well enough to speak into our lives in this way.

Before getting too prickly over criticism that comes our way, it's worth reminding ourselves of what the famous preacher C.H. Spurgeon once wisely remarked, "If any man thinks ill of you, do not be angry with him, for you are worse than he thinks you to be."

### **2) *Pray***

Second, as with godly criticism, when we face ungodly criticism, we should remember to pray. As the hymn goes,

Do your friends despise, forsake you? Take it to the Lord in prayer! In his arms he'll take and shield you; you will find a solace there.

Again, we should be praying for our own hearts in light of what we have heard. Pray that the Lord would help us to love the person who has criticised us and that our hearts would not be embittered by the criticism. Pray that the Lord would give us the grace and wisdom to respond well and in a way that honours him. Prayer softens our spirit and helps us discern how to deal with criticism in a way that reflects Christ.

### **3) *Consider the 5%***

Someone once counseled me that even if you disagree with the majority of a critique, there will likely always be an element of truth in what has been said. Perhaps it's 5%, maybe less. And so, having prayed about what has been said, it's worth seeing what truth may be salvaged from their harsh words.

As someone wisely wrote, "It's rare that you can't find a little gold in even the biggest load of trash." And as Proverbs reminded us, such an approach will make a wise person only wiser. So, consider sifting the words that come your way, in the most charitable light, to see where the person criticising you may have a point. This humble posture is central to accepting criticism without letting it define you.

### **4) *Respond with Grace***

Earlier in this life skills guide, we considered Jesus and how he handled criticism: "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Pet. 2:23). This is how Jesus handled unjust critique. He

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didn't always feel the need to retaliate, and when he did respond, he responded with words of grace.

There will be times when it is right to say nothing. But if we feel the need to reply, then we are called to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15), and to "get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (Eph. 4:31-32). Graceful communication is one of the surest signs that we have learned how to take criticism without resentment.

### **5) *Lean into Christian community***

Finally, in this situation, we can lean on our Christian community. The Christian life is not one that we are to live in isolation. That's true in both good times and hard times. And so, when we encounter ungodly criticism, we should appropriately lean into our Christian community.

What does this look like? It may mean asking a mentor or mature believer for help understanding how we should receive or respond to untimely criticism. Now, care must be exercised when we do this. We need to ensure that we don't fall into self-pity, gossip, or slander.

However, we can ask a trusted person for their opinion on whether and to what extent the criticism is valid. Perhaps ask a trusted friend what the "5% truth" might be. And ask them to check in on you and your heart from time to time about the situation.

Being part of a loving, accountable church community creates an environment where responding to criticism becomes less threatening because you are surrounded by people who love you, want you to grow, and understand your weaknesses.

#### ***Reflection Questions:***

1. When you receive harsh or unfair criticism, what practical steps could help you slow down and avoid reacting in anger or defensiveness?
2. Think of a time you received criticism that felt unfair or hurtful. Looking back, was there a small element of truth ("the 5%") that God might have wanted you to see? How could you use that lesson to grow in humility and wisdom?
3. How can you ensure your response to ungodly criticism reflects Christ's grace and truth? Who in your Christian community could you lean on for prayer and accountability when you face such situations?

# 5

## WE SHOULD SEEK TO GIVE GODLY CRITICISM

So far in this life skills guide, we've considered receiving criticism. However, there will be times when we need to give feedback to others. And when those times come, we should seek to do so in a godly way. Our goal in providing such feedback is not to win an argument but to build up a brother or sister in Christ.

So, how can we give godly criticism? Here are five steps to providing such feedback.

### **1) Pray**

Once again, we should pray before we give correction or reproof. Through prayer, we seek God's wisdom to discern the right timing, tone, and approach for the conversation.

Prayer can also work in our hearts to prepare us for hard conversations. Prayer softens our spirit and helps to replace harshness with compassion and defensiveness with patience. I know that I find it harder to be short-tempered and angry with those for whom I am praying.

Pray that you would speak with grace, humility, and love. And also pray for the other person's heart. Start by asking the Lord that they would receive your correction with understanding and openness.

### **2) Be specific**

In all our feedback, we should aim to be specific. Vague generalisations are not as helpful for those we are correcting, and they can be more open to misunderstanding. Specific feedback helps others understand clearly what they need to change or improve, rather than leaving them confused or discouraged by vague comments.

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So, without sounding like you are keeping a record of wrongs (1 Cor. 13:5), we should aim to give particular examples of the action that needs correcting. This is difficult for those of us who don't like upsetting others. But in such a case, it's good to be reminded that when feedback is concrete and rooted in love, it reflects God's character.

Ultimately, specificity in godly feedback ensures that our words edify the other person (Eph. 4:29) and guide them toward righteousness and truth.

### **3) Be humble and gentle**

As we saw earlier in this life skill guide, our tone and manner matter when we give feedback to others. Scripture calls us to correct others gently and in love. So, Paul in Galatians 6:1 says, *“Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.”*

Gentleness shows that we are seeking to speak words that heal rather than harm, guiding others toward truth with compassion and kindness. In doing so, we aim to reflect Christ's heart, the one who was full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

### **4) Guard against a critical spirit**

If you have to give regular feedback, you may be tempted toward a critical spirit, and we must guard our hearts against this tendency.

How can we ensure that we steer our hearts away from having a critical spirit? Well, here are some questions to ask ourselves as we consider giving a Christian brother or sister feedback,

- Am I seeking to guide this person onto a good path, or am I just seeking to condemn them?
- Would it bring me joy to see them come to the truth?
- Do I desire to see God honoured or just prove myself right?

Asking these kinds of questions can help us discern if we are acting from pure or impure motives. Answering them honestly before the Lord can help guard our hearts from developing a critical spirit.

### **5) Cultivate encouragement**

A culture and relationships of encouragement are key if any correction is to land well. One writer helpfully said, *“If encouragement is intentional, persistent, and honest, then critique will serve as a polishing cloth on each other’s hearts. If it is not, then it will turn into a flamethrower.”* I think that's

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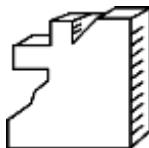
right. When people understand that encouragement defines your tone, they will be far more open to receiving your thoughts because they trust your motives. This dynamic is especially important when learning how to handle criticism in everyday life, and particularly when navigating criticism in relationships.

To this end, we should regularly examine what words come from our mouths, particularly toward those with whom we are in close contact. Does encouragement more readily flow than critique? If not, are there some adjustments (and apologies) needed? When encouragement strengthens relational trust, even difficult conversations feel safer, and criticism in relationships becomes far less damaging and more refining.

So we've seen ways in which we can grow in giving godly criticism. Handled rightly, it can be a wonderful tool that the Lord uses to sharpen us and grow us in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus (2 Pet. 3:18). And in this spirit, learning how to handle criticism with humility and grace becomes part of how we reflect Christ in our closest relationships.

### ***Reflection Questions:***

1. Think of a recent situation where you felt the need to correct someone. How might praying beforehand have changed your attitude, tone, or choice of words in that conversation?
2. In your current relationships (family, church, workplace, ministry), what are some practical ways you could intentionally build a *culture of encouragement* so that future feedback is received with trust rather than defensiveness?
3. When giving feedback, how can you check your own heart to ensure you are being *humble and gentle* rather than developing a *critical spirit*? What specific signs might show that your motives are slipping toward pride or judgment instead of love?



# CONCLUSION

Over the course of this field guide, we've considered that criticism is the inevitable result of sin. We've seen that criticism can be divided into two different kinds: godly and ungodly. We've then considered some principles to help us discern the type of criticism we are facing. We've then considered how to handle criticism wisely, how we can respond to different types of critique, and lastly how we can give constructive criticism that seeks to build up rather than tear down.

As I've reflected on criticism and how to deal with it, a specific paragraph of the Bible has never been far from my mind-Galatians 4:22–26:

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.*

Underneath all that we've considered, one foundational way of growing in how to handle criticism is for the fruit of the Spirit to grow in our lives. When we cultivate love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, we are more likely to respond to criticism in ways that honour God rather than react out of pride or hurt.

When criticism is godly-offered in truth and love-the fruit of the Spirit enables us to humbly listen and grow from it, discerning how God may be shaping our character through the words spoken to us. When criticism becomes constant criticism, or when it is ungodly-harsh or unfair-the same spiritual fruit keeps us from retaliating rashly, allows us to forgive without bitterness, and helps us remember that every believer will face unfair words at times just as Christ did.

Ultimately, growing in the fruit of the Spirit transforms criticism, whether just or unjust, into an opportunity for deeper maturity, greater reliance on

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God, and a more reflective display of Christ's character in our lives. In this way, even constructive criticism becomes a grace-filled tool for growth, and even constant criticism loses its power to shape our identity. Christ remains the One who defines us, sustains us, and strengthens us as we continue learning how to handle criticism with humility and love..



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