

DEALING WITH CRITICISM



We all face criticism at some time or other. It is unavoidable. Anyone who speaks the truth, lives with integrity, serves God, follows Jesus without compromise, and uses the Bible as their plumb line, will be criticised. We need to accept this, and again and again reaffirm our promise to live only for Jesus.

We too are guilty of criticising others, and we must learn how to confront and overcome our own critical spirit.

Dealing with criticism from others

1. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad

Paul writes: *But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord.* (1 Corinthians 4:3-4). Only the Holy Spirit can show us what is wrong in our lives. However, the sting of criticism is not easy to bear, and it can tire us spiritually. Destructive criticism is a form of rejection. It is negative and humiliating. Anyone exposed to this kind of criticism may begin to doubt themselves, and they will need edification. We see an example of how to face criticism in the life of Daniel. In Daniel 6, we read that those who were trying to find fault with him said, *"We shall not find any charge against this Daniel unless we find it against him concerning the law of his God."* (Daniel 6:5). Yet, Daniel continued to kneel before God in praise and thanksgiving, three times a day! Notice that Daniel's prayers were offered with *praise and thanksgiving*. In Matthew 5:11-12, Jesus said, *"Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad..."* We read also that Daniel went before the Lord in *prayer and supplication* (Daniel 6:11). Take careful note of these four words: praise, thanksgiving, prayer and supplication. This is our roadmap for facing continual criticism: praise God, thank Him, pray and petition Him (make supplication unto Him) regarding the situation you face.

2. Die to self

When we find ourselves facing continual criticism, we need to die to self. There is no alternative. 'Dying to self' means that we choose God above anything or anyone else in the world, and we do not allow the approval or disapproval of others to influence our actions. Dying to self is a *daily* process. It is a decision to *choose* to do the will of God and not be deterred by the criticism of others. We need the Holy Spirit's wisdom for each situation we face.

3. Forgive them

Living under continual criticism requires that we must forgive continually and choose to love those who criticise us. The Lord's principle of 'seventy times seven' will be severely tested, and we cannot do this in our own strength. Rather, we must hand over the matter to God. We need to forgive those who are criticising us and ask the Holy Spirit to give us His love for them. We read in Romans 5:5 that it is the Holy Spirit who pours out the love of God into our hearts. Only this love from God will enable you to be victorious.

4. Don't be defensive

It is important not to defend yourself, but rather to allow your actions to speak in your defence. It is also true that as believers we must be prepared to carry injustice (1 Corinthians 6:7). When we do, God Himself will demonstrate our innocence at the right time (Luke 18:8). It goes without saying that we should always weigh up any criticism we receive against the truth of the matter, as God sees it. Too often we get angry and feel unfairly treated, yet we may not recognise that aspects of our own lives can offend or hurt others. We must regularly ask God to show us what in our lives is not pleasing to Him, the things that cause offence, hurt others and undermine our integrity.

5. Loved and accepted

Finally, we must allow God to show us how He sees us, and how He feels about us. When we experience His love and acceptance, we are emboldened to live a life that is pleasing to Him, being a witness of His love and doing what He predestined for us.

Dealing with your own critical spirit

You can recognise if you have a critical spirit through your remarks, and if you have a disposition or behaviour that is destructive and lacking in grace and love. The words and/or actions of someone with a critical spirit not only destroy other people but themselves also. Criticism, in essence, is a shortage of love and acceptance. More specifically, it is fear.

Many people struggle with a critical spirit, and there are various triggers that can create this, such as being belittled, wronged or disempowered through culture, circumstances or legislation. It is from a position of helplessness that rebellion rises up, and one way of giving expression to it, is to be critical. Criticism, therefore, often arises from feelings of rejection or hurt, or as a result of feeling diminished in some way.

At first, voicing criticism may feel fair and even provide relief, but it quickly breeds bitterness, erodes the soul and leads to self-destruction. Having a critical spirit means you place all the blame on someone else's shoulders, which often leads to passivity – others 'owe' you, you are always the 'victim' etc. Worst of all, it is impossible for such a person to feel truly happy, as there is always something which 'isn't right' or 'makes them unhappy'. This is a lethal combination and is very self-destructive.

A critical spirit can also result from jealousy, spite or a feeling of 'failure'. Such individuals experience that others have 'something' they don't possess, and they believe that this 'lack' puts them in a bad light – they feel humiliated and unworthy. In such cases, criticism is an 'equaliser': I don't want others to be 'bigger' or 'better' than I am!

We often make assumptions regarding another person's actions too hastily and this leads to us feeling 'threatened'.

How can I be set free from a critical spirit?

1. God loves you

Know that God loves you, and that His love is a perfect love. Human love will always be lacking and it will never totally satisfy us. God has shown His love for us, having died for us. *Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.* (John 15:13). The first step is to accept this love by telling God directly that you accept His love. God's love is never conditional. He loves you, despite who you are or what you have done. He is not ashamed of you! He is not shy to call you His 'friend'. This is such a deep and important truth, that it brings great freedom to each person who believes it and accepts it, and who takes God at His word.

2. Acknowledge your critical spirit

Acknowledge you have a critical spirit and make a conscious decision not to speak ill of anyone or to criticise anymore. For as long as you deny having a critical spirit, you will be under bondage to it. However, you need to do more than merely acknowledge it. In God's eyes, it is sin! Often, we justify our critical nature as 'having insight' or 'good judgment', 'wisdom' or the 'gift of discernment'. Too often we excuse our actions, when instead we should see them as God does and confess them as sin.

3. The power of the Spirit

Whenever you criticise someone, you will experience that you feel spiritually depleted afterwards. It drains all the spiritual power out of your life. It is hard to pray freely when you have spoken negatively about someone! Ask God to fill you with His Spirit, and to give you a spirit of self-control. Without the power of the Holy Spirit, you will not be victorious.

4. Look at the positive

When you next find yourself thinking negatively about someone or are about to criticise them, choose to look at their positive aspects instead. Pray and ask the Lord to show you their 'other' side – what is good and positive about them. Write it down or tell someone. This will help you not to judge (and 'sentence') them harshly or ungraciously. When you have nothing positive to say, decide to say nothing at all! This may be difficult at first, but there is no other way.

5. Notice the plank in your own eye

Look closely at your own life, and you may find that the very things you criticise in others are also found in you. This is difficult to admit, yet often the case. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you the '*plank in your own eye*' (Matthew 7:3-5).

A last remark

We can do all things, through Christ who strengthens us. (Philippians 4:13). God can help you, and He wants to help you, but first you have to ask for His help and be willing to be set free from your critical spirit.