

## Coping with Criticism

*Minister's fraternal 2010*

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Thank you.

Change of Voice:

All right. Turn with me, please to 1 Peter 2:21-23.

For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously.<sup>1</sup>

May God bless his holy Word.

Well, I want to speak to you just a while this morning about how to cope with criticism in the ministry. Eighty-five percent of ministers have designated criticism as the most problematic issue they have had to deal with in the ministry. And what has been most astonishing to me is how little has been written, discussed at conferences on this very practical, important subject.

What happens in many ministers is they develop a kind of shell. They are unreachable as people, ultimately, because they are trying to cope with criticism and they put up a shell. Or else they become internally very bitter and develop a pessimistic attitude to the ministry itself.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter 2:21-23.

And really a pessimistic minister is little better than a proud one, because actually pessimism is rooted in our pride.

Since ministers become pessimistic because they often think at bottom that they deserve better treatment than they are getting and that, ultimately, is pride, isn't it? And in some cases we may be right when we feel that way, but we are failing to exercise self denial as our master did who suffered far worse things at the hands of men than we will ever suffer as 1 Peter has just recorded. And yet he did not retaliate at all.

So how can you not retaliate and cope with criticism and not become bitter and have an optimistic, wholesome view of the ministry? How can you be like Paul and be in prison and write a letter to the Philippians and say, "Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice"?"<sup>2</sup>

How can you say with Paul in Philippians 4:11, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content"?"<sup>3</sup>

I am sure we all realize that no one appreciates a pessimistic, complaining, whining bitterness. But how do you cultivate an attitude of joy and peace and strength by God's grace in a ministry that is positive and upbeat for your people in a biblical way and yet avoid insomnia and exasperation and resignation and cynicism when you get all this criticism?

Well, what I want to do in this hour is give you, I think it is 10 or 11 things to consider.

Number one is consider criticism inevitable. At one point in my life I got great comfort from reading in John Wesley's diary that he said he once questioned if he was truly right with God since he had received no criticism for the entire day.

See, it is futile to think that you can avoid criticism in the ministry.

Andy Stanley engaged in what he calls visioneering and really every minister is a visionary, isn't he? If you are not going to do anything in the ministry, maybe you can avoid most criticism.

As one minister said to me, "My church is so peaceful, at our last three annual congregational meetings not a single question was raised about anything," as if that was positive.

But if you are a visionary, you are going to be implementing changes and implementing changes brings about criticism. So this belongs to the occupational hazard of the ministry. This comes with the turf, brothers. It is what we need to inspect.

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<sup>2</sup> Philippians 4:4.

<sup>3</sup> Philippians 4:11.

There is an old Dutch saying that says, “He who stands in the front must be expected to be kicked in the rear.”

See, if you are going to proclaim the whole counsel of God, as you should, you are going to get criticism because when you proclaim the whole counsel of God, you are going to be stepping on toes. When you step on toes, you get criticism, particularly if you step on the toes of people’s children.

When I visited a dear brother named Ernie Reisinger who has helped many, many ministers, a very wise man who has now gone to be with the Lord, he was a Banner of Truth trustee, perhaps many of you know him, but I visited him in his home and he took me out to a restaurant two years after I was in Grand Rapids. I have been in Grand Rapids 23 years now.

And he asked me how things were going and I said, “Ernie, I don’t really know, but there is something about Grand Rapids. Either the people hate me or they love me. Like nobody is neutral.”

And he took his great big former construction hand and he slapped it across my knee and said, “That’s great.”

Well, it doesn’t feel very great.

But he said, “That’s great, because, you see, it means you are getting through, because people respond.”

“Woe unto you,” Jesus said, “if all men speak well of you,” Luke 6:26.

So expect criticism and don’t be devastated by it. That is number one.

Number two, consider the source. Who is criticizing you? Is it an office bearer that you need to work with every week? Is it a mature believer? Is it a baby in grace? Is it an unbeliever? Is it, perhaps, a fringe member of the church?

Do you know that 85 percent of the criticism that ministers get today come from people who are fringe members to begin with. Is it perhaps a very highly critical individual who has criticized the last four ministers that have come along? Is it someone who just is completely ignorant of what they are doing? That makes a big difference. Who is criticizing.

Now if it is someone who really means your welfare, if it is an office bearer, for example who really wants your minister effective, you have got to take that criticism very, very seriously. And the more sincerely you can genuinely welcome constructive criticism, the more your ministry and your relationships with others will benefit from it.

And yet on the other hand we have got to be careful that we don't respond excessively to complaints that are raised by just a few, especially complaints that really have little substance to them.

I remember my first church. We had a meeting where we had three ladies come from the women's guild to complain about something and so we heard their case and said, "Yeah, well, that sounds really reasonable." So changed the decision. I don't even know what it was, but it was something that would impact all the women. Well, at the next meeting we had 25 women.

So sometimes two or three complaints, you know, may not just in themselves be substantial enough to change things. You need to look at the body as a whole and don't jump with every little complaint that comes your way or the church's way.

Now when three people complain and you have a church of 15, you had better look at the complaint quite seriously, but if you have a church of 700 and three people complain that is probably not a big deal in itself.

So consider the source. Who is complaining? And then consider their motivation. What is making them tick? Are they, perhaps, jealous of you? Are they concerned about the real wellbeing of the church? Are they being selfish? What is their hidden agenda? Are they feeling excluded?

Speak to them. Open them up. Get them to lay their cards on the table. You draw them out. You have been trained how to listen to people. And you will find out the truth if you give them enough time to talk and to express their concern.

One of our problems as ministers, of course, is when people start to express their complaint, we start having answers before we have heard them out completely and so we short circuit the whole process and we don't even learn to know the motivation because we have cut them off and they then go back to other people and spread the word around the church.

"You know, the minister really can't cope well with criticism. He cuts you off before you even [?]. No use going to him."

And so they become more critical.

Now I grant you it is hard and I am by no means the best example of this, but I try with all my power to listen to the person, to draw him out. I have got a thousand things I want to say sometimes, but I hold my tongue. I just let them speak, let them speak.

Oh, sometimes I will say, "Is there... do you have any other concerns at all?"

Just let them get everything out. And, yes, it is painful. But it is far better doing it that way than having the thing drag out for years.

So consider who is criticizing you. Consider the motivation and then, very important. Consider yourself. Critics are often God's gifts to guard us from being self satisfied and self destructive.

What do I mean by that?

Well, the Holy Spirit, he uses our critics to keep us from justifying and protecting and exulting ourselves. If I didn't have critics, I am sure I would go too far in this direction or too far in that direction. Critics have a way of kind of juggling us back into the racetrack and so we don't wander into byways and go to extremes. And although critics often exaggerate their case—in fact, 99 percent of the time they do—maybe that was an exaggeration—they are seldom entirely right, but they are also seldom entirely wrong. And usually there is something you can learn from your critic.

The worst thing we can do when someone criticizes us is get real technical about every word that he is saying. When they finally get a chance to pour out their ... get everything off their chest and put everything on our chest, when they finally get a chance to do that, they are prone to use language that is too strong. They are prone to say something like this.

“Well, pastor, always when you...”

You interrupt them.

“Always? Is it always true?”

You see, and then they are defensive and then you get into this entanglement of war of words. Just let the word “always” slip by. They don't really mean always. What they are trying to do is they are trying to get you to see this problem area that you are not addressing rightly.

So don't take every word so literally and henpeck every word. But get the global drift of what they are saying. What is bothering them and is there some truth in what is bothering them? And generally there will be a little bit of truth in it.

So you need to ask yourself as you consider yourself. Am I responding appropriately to criticism? If I claim as a minister to have an ear for Christ, shouldn't I have an ear for his people?

And if you find yourself habitually feeling slighted and neglected and mistreated in the ministry, you ought to view those feelings with some suspicion. Most people really want to treat their minister well.

You want to let yourself be more vulnerable here. You will complain less if you consider how little criticism you receive when you recall how unworthy you are to serve the Lord Jesus Christ who is perfectly worthy.

It is amazing how quick we are to defend ourselves. We say we believe in total depravity, but when someone accuses us of any depravity at all, we rise up in arms. We say we are not perfect ministers, but when anyone accuses us of any particular sin, we are ready to go to bat for ourselves 100 percent.

I had an elder several years ago who really spoke out against the ministry so strongly that the elders had to rebuke him and he didn't repent. Finally he said, "Oh, right, I repent. You can charge me of every sin, all 10 Commandments. I am a sinner against all 10 Commandments, but against that sin of bearing false witness I will never agree to that."

You see, he is guilty of all 10, but when you specified it, you see, he won't face that sin. And that is the way we can get as ministers as well.

So we need to be able to learn to say, "I was wrong. Will you please forgive me?"

If you never find yourself saying that as a minister something is wrong with you. We are making hundreds of decisions in the ministry. We are having thousands of interactions with people. Come on. We are not going to do all these perfect. And, yeah, we fall short many, many, many times. So why not just admit it?

So when people come and they say something you and you never... Yes, oh, yes, yes, I should have done that differently.

So instead of trying to defend yourself which is usually the worst policy, try to admit as much wrong as you can while yet being realistic. You don't have to admit you are wrong in things where you are not wrong. But go as far as you can with your credit ask them for forgiveness. And you will be amazed how many people come right around when you just simply say, "I was wrong. Please forgive me."

Well, what if they are 70 percent wrong and you are 30 percent wrong? You admit you are 30 percent wrong and you ask for their forgiveness. And when they have forgiven you, and they usually will at that point, I mean, maybe, maybe what they will often do is they will say, "Well, yeah, come to think of it, I was, you know, wasn't all together right here either." And then the 70 percent will come out. But if you try and go up to the 70 percent before you even admit your 30 percent, you can get into a tangled mess.

So consider yourself. And one thing that can really help you here is to develop accountability partners to monitor your reactions.

In my consistory or session, whatever you call it with elders and deacons, for the last 20 years in my ministry, I wish I had gotten it the first 12 as well, but I didn't, but the last 20 years I have always had one elder that I thought was very wise and I have pulled him

aside particularly and said, “Will you be my accountability partner in the consistory meetings and in the ministry and tell me at any time where you see me acting inappropriately from being a servant of God? Would you be... have the honesty to come to me and just talk to me lovingly about it?”

And I have never asked a man who has refused that request. I pick them out carefully.

But the last one, the newest one that I have got now is really interesting because when I said, “You know, I have got some weaknesses and I need to be monitored,” he said to me, “Well, I have got some weaknesses I need to be monitored, too. Will you be mine as well in the consistory room?”

So that is a neat thing when you can have each other and be confidential with each other and help each other be just a tad bit wise and a little more self controlled.

A second kind of accountability partner you might want to develop is someone who is outside of your denomination. That can be a huge help, particularly as a fellow ministry. I always have a couple of ministers in different denominations, well, I have asked [?] actually counsel and advice on a few situations. And I have done that with some other ministers of other denominations. It is far less threatening because that minister is not going to go tell that minister who is going to tell that minister. So you can ask. How would you cope with this particular criticism? You see, ask another minister.

I remember had two very close friends who deserted my ministry, left the church and I was hurting. I mean I was hurting big time. I felt like David.

“Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me.”<sup>4</sup>

And I tried. I mean, I knocked my head against the door trying to get back into the good graces of these two men and it wasn't working and I finally called a friend in Illinois, a pastor friend from another denomination and I said, “You know, this is what has happened. This is what I have done. This is where I admitted I was wrong. And I just can't get that friendship back. What must I do?”

And there was a pause. This is a very wise man. And he said, “Well, Joel, there is a text in Proverbs that says, ‘A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city.’<sup>5</sup>”

And he let that sink in for a while. And then he said, “I think you have got 700 other people to look after. You can't spend all your time trying to bring back two.”

He let that sink in for a while and he said, “I think you need... it is time to move on. Commit it to the Lord. You have done what you can.”

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 41:9.

<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 18:19.

And I hung up the phone. I said, “All three of those things are so obvious and yet I was completely blind to them in my frantic need to get these two men back.”

I just had to let it go. That was wise advice.

And then, thirdly, the best accountability partner of all is your own wife, providing she is a wise woman like mine is. You didn’t hear that, Mary. Because with your wife you can be totally honest, can’t you? She knows you through and through.

Just one caution. We men can color our stories about our critics to our wives so that our wives actually become more critical of our critics than we are of our critics. So we have to be very careful that we are completely honest with them and try to present the material objectively.

But they can help us a great deal. They can help us a great deal. And when our wives gently correct us, gently suggest where we have gone over our boundaries, we had better listen to them. Generally speaking women have intuition than men anyway when it comes to interpersonal relationships and where boundaries are.

So consider yourself in all these ways. Develop accountability partners and don’t think yourself sufficient. See, as soon as you think yourself sufficient you can handle all these things by yourself. That is when you come in trouble, because then you are always right and everyone else is always wrong. That is where bitterness and callousness and lots of ministerial problems surface.

Number four, consider timing and prayer. The physical setting and timing and situation under which the criticism comes can help you determine whether it is helpful. But whether it is helpful or not helpful, you need some space and time, generally speaking, to respond to it, unless you are... I have one colleague in the ministry in our denomination, just one who can respond immediately to criticism with such objectivity that it is amazing. I don’t know how he does it. I need some space and time.

And I will generally try to get 24 hours. If I can have 24 hours to pray about it and to let the intense wave of feeling that comes over me subside, I can handle it so much better.

So let’s say I get an email just lambasting me from A to Z. What is my response? Well, my response is to type the email right back, but I have learned I can’t do that. I need 24 hours and usually if I have 24 hours I can send a message... well, actually I never send a message back. That is one of my rules. I never answer criticism from email by email. I always call the person. Personal contact is always better. And I train, actually, our theological students never should you as a minister ever criticize anyone by email either. Whenever you want to criticize someone, call them up. Get fact to face.

When you want to complement someone, send them a formal letter. You know, they can print it out. They can hang it up. But when you criticize someone, face to face is always better.



So consider timing and then consider prayer. Prayer time is actually critical. When you bow your knees and pray over criticism, you make yourself so much more vulnerable and there is a lot greater chance you will admit your own wrong doing when you do that, when you come face to face with God.

And do remember that you are more known in the congregation for your reactions than for your actions. So you will... you will develop a reputation as to whether or not you are approachable.

Every one of you men in the ministry right now, 90 percent of your congregation has an opinion on whether you are approachable or unapproachable when it comes to criticism. And if your reputation is you are unapproachable, you may think things are going pretty well in your church, but there is things simmering inside of your people that they haven't been able to express to you. Things aren't as well as they should be.

Truth has a way of eventually vindicating itself. And so do remember your reactions. You can't always resolve everything right away. Some things take time, more than the 24 hour time. Forcing solutions to issues too hastily can make a bad situation worse.

Sometimes we just need patience. Some situations will yield only to the healing touch of time. You see, sometimes we are like fathers to our congregation, aren't we? And you know what it is like with children. You see your child going down the wrong way in some way and you say, "I wish I could stop him in this particular area, but he is almost determined. He has got to learn it for himself." Sometimes our people are like that. They are judging us about something, but we know we are right in that particular area. We have got to give them time to see the light of that particular thing as well.

Luke 21 verse 19 puts it this way.

"In your patience possess ye your souls."<sup>6</sup>

So sometimes we just need to wait, more patient teaching and that criticism will just fade away.

Number five, consider the content. You see, some of our best friends are those who disagree with us lovingly, openly and intelligently.

"Faithful are the wounds of a friend,"<sup>7</sup> says Proverbs 27 verse six.

Helpful criticism is actually like good medicine.

David [?] says, "Critics, like governing authorities are servants of God to you for good. He who sees into hearts uses critics to help us see things in ourselves, outright failings of

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 21:19.

<sup>7</sup> Proverbs 27:6.

faith and practice, distorted emphases, blind spots, areas of neglect, attitudes and actions contradictory to stated commitments and, yes, strengths and significant contributions as well.”

So the first thing you need to do when you get a criticism is say this. Could my critic really be trying to help me and how can I improve my self and my ministry from this criticism? Is there a kernel of truth or 10 kernels of truth in this particular criticism which if changes are made, will make me better minister?

Now if that is the case, what we need to do is absorb the criticism, confess our fault, take the lead in self criticism and say, “You know, you are completely right. Thank you for correcting me. I see it more clearly now. You have done me a favor. Thank you so much, brother.”

Ask for forgiveness wholeheartedly and then make changes for the better and move on. Don’t dwell on it forever. Make the changes and move on.

Now if the critic offers you absolutely nothing constructive, you have asked him for time to think about it. You have gotten back to him. You are kind and polite and you say, “Now I understand where you are coming from. I understand, you know, your rationale and I have laid it before the Lord and I think that the way I handling things in this area, though, I really believe this is the correct way as far as I can see it. So I appreciate your input, but I am going to just continue.”

See, you can say that politely.

And then you love him.

But, you see, the conclusion of both matters is you deal with it, you face it between God and you. You either correct or you don’t correct, but either way you move on. You move on. You don’t allow your ministry to become stagnated and into some kind of paralysis because you are under criticism.

That is like Nehemiah building the walls, you know? You have go the sword and the trowel. You can’t just always be using the sword and nothing ever get done with the trowel. You have got to keep building. The work of the ministry has got to go on. You can’t let a few people stymie you into inaction.

Now when you consider this content, the worst thing you can do is become self defensive or angry.

I have been a minister for 30... what 32 years or so. Yeah and two times in the ministry—and I regret both of them immensely—I have blown up at people. I mean, blown up at people, gotten very angry. Both of them were disaster and there is absolutely no excuse for it. Anger never is a solution. If you feel yourself getting angry, you are better off just shutting down the visit with a prayer and saying, “I will come back and we will deal with

it again. I need to think about it more,” or whatever. But don’t respond in anger. That is not the way of a servant of God.

If your conscience is clear, a simple, straightforward explanation can be helpful in certain cases, though sometimes respectful silence is appropriate and effective as well.

Mark 14:61.

But at all costs, you see, you don’t strive to justify yourself.

My wife and I were sitting in a restaurant one day and I was wrestling with a problem. Someone was criticizing me and I was wondering should I explain it to them? The person was pretty critical of me. Maybe I am getting in deeper water. I don’t know.

It seems so... I always had this tendency inside of me to think that if I just explain things to people they will understand. You know, sort of like Luther going to the pope. You know, if I just explain it, he will become [?].

It doesn’t work that way.

Anyway, we are sitting in this restaurant and there is these packs of sugar with little sayings on the back and we are talking about what you should do and I turned one over and it says, “Don’t explain. Your friends don’t need it and your enemies won’t believe you anyhow.” And there is a lot of truth in that, actually.

Refuse to descend to the level of the negative critic. Don’t render evil for evil. Fight God’s battles, not your own and you will discover that he will fight yours. It is not for you to repay.

Romans 12 verse 19 says:

“Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.”<sup>8</sup>

And please don’t take every whisper overly seriously. Sometimes ministers get into this mode. I have got one brother, a colleague, a dear, dear brother. It is his Achilles heel. If someone says something evil about him, he has got to track it down. Who said it? Who told that to that person? It is like he is a policeman going after them. It is hopeless. Let it go. Do the work of the Lord. These things will fade away.

There is an old Dutch saying that says, “Every rumor after 60 days will be dead.”

And if you walk worthy of your calling, you see, it will be 30 days, because people will realize this is not the truth. Truth will vindicate itself after a while. So don’t hunt down every little thing.

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<sup>8</sup> Romans 12:19.

Now one more thing to consider yourself, I find it extremely helpful, is to bury yourself in your work. Maybe this sounds not very spiritual, but when I come home from a consistory meeting and I have been raked over the coals about something and I am really down and discouraged, I will talk to my wife for a while and if it is midnight by that time and I know that I am not going to sleep well, I will go back to my study at midnight. I will just start working. I will work till three. And that does a world of good for me. So I get involved in another project.

It is like the son... you know, there was a father went to teach his son how to do sail boating and they were out in the sea. And the father said, "You know, when the wave comes over the ship and it is coming at you, don't just stand there and let the wave hit you. It will throw you overboard. But as the wave hits you, shift the weight of your feet and you will be able to stand a lot more."

And I have always felt that in the ministry. I have always had to have other tasks. I have had to have another... for me, if I have another book that I am writing, it is something I can take refuge in when I am coping with criticism or I will teach another class or do something different to shift my weight, you see so I just don't dwell on this and dwell on this and dwell on this.

So don't let criticism fester. You have got lots of wonderful things to do. Bury yourself in your work. Not to avoid it long term, but the short term hurt sometimes is handled much better when you go back to work.

Number six, consider Scripture. Some leaders are so delicate that they cannot endure criticism without crumbling. And that is really my nature, to be quite honest with you. I grew up in a very peaceful home. I heard my parents argue once in their entire life and it was over me. But it was only once. And when I entered the ministry I just had this naïve idea that, you know, everybody treated a minister pretty easily. And I didn't have much emotional muscle developed for criticism.

Other ministers are so battle hardened by their past that they have the hide of a rhinoceros and people can say anything about them like Theodore [?] in the 18<sup>th</sup> century had a little sign on the back of his carriage that said, "Go ahead and criticize me all you want. I don't care," basically is what it said.

I want to do the Lord of the work regardless. I could never be Theodore [?].

Someone else has said the secret of successful ministry is developing the hide of a rhinoceros while maintaining the heart of the child. I have been trying to do that for 32 years and never been successful yet. I don't know how you do the two. But there is some truth to it, I suppose. But how do it.

We probably all gravitate, you see, toward one extreme or the other. Either we are too tender or we are too hardened. But what we need to do in each case is we need to use the

Scriptures, let the Scriptures help us. And I have got particular texts in my life. I am sure you have got them in your life that help you in your own weaknesses when it comes to criticism.

One thing that really helps me is Romans 8:28.

“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God.”<sup>9</sup>

So I talk to myself when criticism comes. This is from the Lord. This is going to work together for good somehow. I certainly don't understand how.

“What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter.”<sup>10</sup>

That is another text that is very important to me.

There is also this text.

“Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love.”<sup>11</sup>

Be kind. Always be kind. No matter how people treat you. Be kind. Be kind. Kindness will eventually win the day.

We went through a terrible denominational split in the early 1990s. It is very, very, very painful. Difficult. I had people on the other side that wouldn't shake my hand, wouldn't shake my wife's hand. And we still had to work with them. We still had the school together. We would go to social situations where there is the school and so we decided together we are going to still be kind to all these people. We are going to up to them and put out our hand. I even went to man's relative who passed away. I mean, the man's relative passed away. It was in the funeral lot. I went to say my sympathy to him. I got up to him.

He said, “No.”

We just kept doing it. We kept doing it. We kept putting out our hands. Three, four, five times. A couple of people refused to shake our hands. Eventually, what do you do? I mean, finally one guy just kind of limply put out his hand. But eventually you win them over. Today there is not a single person in that whole congregation that won't shake both of our hands because we persisted, purposefully to show them kindness.

And I... I feel very, very strongly about it. In fact, I had a member come to me and said, “I have got a complaint against you. You show more attention to your enemies than your friends.”

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<sup>9</sup> Romans 8:28.

<sup>10</sup> John 13:7.

<sup>11</sup> Romans 12:10.

I want to make sure that my enemies, you see, when I walk across the church parking lot, I want to make sure that they don't think I am avoiding them. So I go out of my way to greet them and be kind to them.

So use the Scriptures to strengthen you. To help you. Plead those Scriptures. Repeat those Scriptures.

Number seven, consider the Lord Jesus Christ. If you forget everything else I say this morning, remember this. This is by far the best solution. Consider the Lord Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 12:3 says:

“For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself.”<sup>12</sup>

And I read to you already the famous Petrine text. The point is this, you see. If Christ who is perfect and all together innocent was spat upon and mocked and rejected and crucified, what can we imperfect pastors expect? And if one of Jesus' own hand picked apostles betrayed him for a paltry sum and another swore that he did not know him out of fear for a servant maid, why should we expect to carry on our ministries without ever being betrayed or deserted.

Actually we should thank God that our critics don't know how bad we truly are. You see, Christ is absolutely innocent. We are always partially guilty.

I almost had someone really, really spread a terrible, terrible rumor about me. I don't even want to repeat it in case it gets taken from here. It was bad. It was all together untrue, 100 percent untrue. There is not a speck of truth in that one. And I was angry. I was bitter. I was pacing my study and I was frustrated. How could I stop this rumor? I was getting calls from different congregations. And finally I tried to pray. I prayed. And then finally in desperation, I don't know if you have ever done this, I just walked over to pick out a book and just started turning over and started reading. I read a paragraph or two and somebody... I came across this. It was in John Brown's *Christian Pastors' Manual*. I will never forget it.

It said, “Do you have a critic that is spreading entirely false rumors about you? Thank God they don't know half how bad you really are.”

So there is truth in that, isn't there? No matter how bad people say things about us, really, inside we are worse than that. So just humble yourself. Wait on the Lord. He will vindicate you in due time.

But I like to think of it this way. If Jesus Christ was willing to suffer so much for me, if he gave himself for his church, if he loved his bride so much, if he loved me so much, if he gave himself for me to die for me, shouldn't I be willing to give myself away to his church, to live for her. And [?] with criticism is just a part of the job. It is nothing

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<sup>12</sup> Hebrews 12:3.

compared to the privilege. I get [?]. I sit in my study sometimes and I clap my hands for joy that I am called to be a servant of the most high, the living God. What a calling.

My dad used to say to me when I was a boy, I felt called to the ministry. He said to be a minister of the gospel is more important than living in the White House. You see, we have so much in the ministry. We never have to wake up any morning in our life with a midlife crisis, do we? And say, "Oh, my job isn't worthwhile."

We are dealing with the souls of men. I count it a privilege. Are you the servant of the Lord Jesus Christ this morning today? Lord, help me.

Don't let a little criticism make me turn aside from this tremendous calling. Consider Jesus Christ, consider the faithfulness of Christ. Consider what he has done for me. Oh, I can never do enough for him.

When we were young kids my dad always said to us. I must have heard it 1000 times. You can never do enough for your mother. You know, she has changed your diapers. She has done everything. You can never do enough for your mother.

I think that is the way a minister should feel about Jesus Christ. I can never do enough for him.

"My brethren, count it all joy,"<sup>13</sup> when you suffer persecution for his name's sake. Great is your reward in heaven.

Every persecution you suffer for his sake will be 1000 times rewarded. Consider the Lord Jesus Christ. And drink deeply of his love and find your delight in the triune God. When people reject you, go to that Savior who never rejects you, who loves you unconditionally with unspeakable love and you will conquer pessimism and you will be able, in fact, to love your critic in return.

So rather than focus on your critic who seems to wield so much power, focus on Christ's greater power and his undying faithfulness as your intercessor and your advocate at the Father's right hand and trust him once more to lead you through, once more. He won't disappoint you.

Sometimes we just need to commit the next moment to the Lord, the next critic to the Lord. Sometimes we get overwhelmed in the ministry. I know I do. I have probably a half a dozen times in an average year where I am driving to church and I am just overwhelmed. I just feel like I can't preach. You talk about that dependency on the Holy Spirit we heard from Dr. Piper last hour. But I just am overwhelmed. I feel like the Spirit is going to desert me. I feel like I am going to have nothing to say. I can't preach. I feel like I absolutely know nothing. I get very quiet and my wife will sense it. My whole family senses it. And she will say something like, "Well, you have got it again, don't you?"

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<sup>13</sup> James 1:2.

I'll say, "Yeah."

She will lean up and put her hand on my arm and say, "The Lord will help you one more time. One more time."

I will get to the foot of the pulpit and I will say, "Lord, help me one more time."

The weakness and fear and trembling. It was [?] because I know the Spirit will own the ministry. And so you ascend the pulpit so weak and he helps you one more time.

Oh, consider the faithfulness of Christ.

Your critics will be dead and buried and Christ will be alive forever. You will be with him. It is going to be all right. Christ will out last your critics.

Number eight, consider biblical saints. Just give you one quick example here for time's sake. Consider Nehemiah. He is a wonderful example of how to handle criticism. There were all these Sanballats and Tobiahs and some of their criticisms were valid and Nehemiah's workers were not skilled. Many of them were not committed. Some sections of the wall were not strong. Some sections could not be rebuilt. So how does Nehemiah respond? Well, he commits his cause to God in prayer. He remembers that the source of this vision was God and not himself. That is a great help if you can say, "Lord, I didn't bring myself to this city, unto this pulpit. Thou hast called me here."

And then he sets up a guard and he revises his plan—notice this—according to circumstances without abandoning his vision. So he has a three step response and that is often what we need to do.

First prayer, then remember and then revise. But don't abandon. Don't abandon division. A failed plan does not equal a failed vision. Usually it means you have to swallow your pride, revamp it or redraft it so that the vision can be implemented better in due time.

Number nine, consider love. Love the one who criticizes you.

You say, "How in the world can I do that?"

Well, you can't apart from Jesus Christ and his grace, but you can when you consider what Christ has done for you.

Seek to understand them, first of all. Seek what makes them tick and then forgive them under the basis that Christ has forgiven you. Forgive them in your conscience every if they haven't asked for forgiveness.



I understand that you can't forgive them in their conscience for something they haven't confessed, but you can forgive them in your own conscience. And that is what gives you a peace that passes understanding.

Spurgeon, I think, put it best. He said this.

“Unless you have forgiven others, you read your own death warrant every time you repeat the Lord's prayer.”

Father, help us to forgive others as we ... forgive us as we forgive others.

Spurgeon goes on to say, “Forgive and forget. When you bury a dead dog, you don't leave its tail sticking up above the ground.”

You see, again, this idea. Be done with it and move on.

Now when he says forget he doesn't mean that you don't have it way back here in my our mind. I mean, you don't go make the guy an elder the next week and say, “This has all been done and forgotten. You do remember this man's same consistent personality. Maybe he is not fit for church leadership because of the criticism and so on. But you don't carry a grudge with you. And one way that can really help you here is to pray with your critic, not just pray for your critic in private, that is important. But pray with your critic and as you pray with him, be careful to be fully objective in that prayer. Don't you... never use prayer to get at someone. Pray with integrity. Pray with humility.

And then another way to love your critic is to feel pity for them. I am talking now about really, really critical people. Have you ever just felt sorry for them? Instead of thinking about what they are doing to you, have you ever felt sorry for them?

I had a family visitation visit one night with a man that was just very, very critical of my ministry. His father was very critical. He passed it on to his son and he has five or six children, beautiful children and he started criticizing me in front of the kids.

And I said to him, “Well, my friend, let's just continue with a normal family visitation and maybe your children could go to bed at the end of the visit and then we can talk more about this.”

“Oh, no,” he said, “My children know all about it anyway.”

And I drove away from that house that night and his kids heard that talk. I felt so sorry for him. What a future these kids have, growing up being critical of a minister of the gospel.

How tragic to be a parent who causes his little ones to stumble.

And, finally, put away anything that inhibits love. Peter says:

“Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings.”<sup>14</sup>

The worst thing you can do is just keep talking about it. Talk to your wife about it. Talk to your family about it. It just keeps perpetuating itself. It is far better to confide in your wife about it once, deal with the thing and then move on.

Number 10, consider long term vision. Remember short term criticism usually is dealt with and it is done away with.

A year from now—think about this—a year from now you will hardly remember this criticism. Don’t get so overwhelmed by it. That is the way to talk to yourself.

You know, Abraham Lincoln was, perhaps, one of the most respected and most reviled presidents in American history. Thousands of people opposed his view on war and slavery. One day a friend pulled Lincoln aside and told him that the criticism had reached such a crescendo that it was as if Lincoln were surrounded by scores of barking dogs. And this was Lincoln’s response.

“You know that during the time of the full moon dogs bark and bark at the moon as long as it is clearly visible in the sky.”

And the friend was puzzled. He said, “What do you mean? That is the rest of the story?”

Lincoln said, “There is not rest of the story because the moon keeps right on shining.”

You see, Lincoln said, was saying, “I believe I am completely right in this situation. My policies are right and the longer I am going to win over the critics, the dogs are going to start barking and the country is going to be unified around these principles.”

The moral of that for us today is that we don’t let a few—I say it with reverence—barking parishioners destroy our ministry when we know we are in the right. Some things we cannot negotiate on and we just have to persevere.

So to obtain temporary peace with a few disgruntled members we are prone to abandon long term biblical vision that shines in our churches and ministries like a full moon. Don’t do that. Don’t be intimidated into capitulation on essentials by critics and by criticism. Don’t allow a few critics to force you into their mold so that you live timid and hesitant lives doing nothing, saying nothing and, worst of all, being nothing. And never give up. Never, never, never give up.

As Winston Churchill said in his five word famous speech to graduates, “Persevere, long term vision.”

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<sup>14</sup> 1 Peter 2:1.

President Theodore Roosevelt said, "It is not the critic who counts. It is not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled that counts. It is not the doer of deeds who could have done better that counts, but the real credit in life belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by the dust and sweat and blood, who keeps striving valiantly, who errs and comes short again and again, but arises again and goes back to the battle.

The man who perseveres is the one who counts.

And finally, number 11. Consider eternity. This is the last one.

Criticism pales in the light of eternity, doesn't it? Jonathan Edwards said, "Oh, Lord," in his resolutions when he was 13 years old. "Stamp eternity on my eyes."

And I would say, "Stamp it on our hearts. Stamp it on our ministry. Stamp it on everything we have and everything we own."

Eternity puts everything in a different light.

When I had the privilege of going to Dundee to go see Robert Murray McChenyne's church which I long to do and instead I got into the adjacent graveyard and opened the gate to the graveyard. There was this large stone, still there today about six feet by six feet. And there was only one word written across the center of it. "Eternity."

I think McChenyne put it there. The word is now faded. You can barely trace it out. I think McChenyne wanted everyone who walked across that stone to the graveyard to consider. I am going to eternity.

And, you see, on the judgment day Peter says, "What [?] if you render evil for evil?"

What will it be like to stand before God in the judgment day and say, "Lord, I have... any... everyone who has criticized me, I have given it back to them."

I want to be able to say on the day of judgment, "Lord, I have walked worthy of the vocation to which you have called me. I have not rendered evil for evil."

I want him, all these precious, precious words. I want him to be able to say to say by grace to me:

"Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord."<sup>15</sup>

And I have to give an account of everyone of my members on the day of judgment. I have to give an account of what they have done with the Word I have brought them and

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<sup>15</sup> Mathew 25:21.

the example I brought them. But I have to give an account of how I have treated them and the words I brought to them. I want to be able to do it with honor in his sight.

Remember that in eternity our Savior will wipe away every tear from our eye and he will be faithful to us. He will be waiting for us. He will never let us down. Every wrong will be made right. Every injustice will be judged. All criticism will be past. All evil will be walled out and all good will be walled in. And in heaven there will be perfect unity. Everything will be well. Even Luther and Calvin will fully agree on every point.

Our believing critics will embrace us and we will embrace them. There will be oneness in Jesus Christ, complete and perfect, invisible. And three great truths will become reality in that day for us. First we will understand that all the criticism we received here below as used in the hands of our potter to prepare us for Immanuel's land. And, second, we will see fully that all the criticisms we were called to bear on earth were but a light affliction compared to the [?] of glory that awaits us. And, third, we will see that we will be more than repaid for every affliction we endured on earth for the sake of our best and perfect friend, the Lord Jesus Christ.

On that happy day when this mortality shall put on immortality and this corruption incorruption, we will ever be with the Lord. And then it shall be fulfilled.

The bride eyes not her garment, but her dear bridegroom's face.  
I will not gaze at glory, but on my King of grace.  
Not at the crown he giveth, but on his pierced hand.  
The Lamb is all the glory of Immanuel's land.

So conclusion? Let's stop our complaining about the criticisms we get in the ministry and count our blessings and let's persevere in the good fight of faith. We have the best of assurances in that fight. We have got the promise of God. We have got the best of advocates, the Holy Spirit. We have got the best of generals, Jesus Christ. We have got the best of results, everlasting glory. So let's not resign, but let's reassign and lift up the hands that hang down and feeble knees and make straight paths for our feet.

You know when we can start complaining? We can start complaining when we have given as much for Christ as he has given for us. And that day will never happen.

So let's go forward lifting him up, being optimistic about the work of the ministry.

Yes, we live in hard times. Yes, we live in a day of small things, but we live in a wonderful day of opportunity. Gird up the loins of your mind. Stand fast. Your Savior is greater than Apollyon. He is greater than the times and your sender will not desert you. Hold fast your profession even when friends desert you by clinging to your high priest who is holding fast to you and will never desert you. He is a friend that sticks closer than a brother. Don't put your trust in princes or a dying fallen world, but in a prince of peace. Look Christward. Lean Christward. Pray Christward. Preach Christward. Live Christward. That, after all, is the way to cope with criticism.

Let's pray.

*Gracious God, we thank thee so much for Jesus Christ and his wonderful example for us and we pray that thou wouldst use this talk to help each brother here to cope with the next criticism and the next and the next and the next that will come our way and to see that all these things will work together for good to conform us more to the image of thy Son and to ripen us for glory and to mature us in ministry. Help us, Lord, to rise above our natural self defensiveness and to use every criticism for true good and for thy glory. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Change of Voice:

I don't think I should say any more after what we have heard today. It was a privilege to be here and thank you for coming. We have just... if you want to talk to the man, feel free to do so. I think that would be the best way to deal with it. Thank you.

Thank you, Joel.