

Coping with.... Criticism

by

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Chapter 1

Truth and Consequences

As usual, we were running late. Way late. For months we had been promising our friends, Len and Catherine, we would arrive at their home no later than 2 p.m. It's a three-hour drive from our place in Melbourne down the east coast of Florida to their home in Boynton Beach. We intended to spend the afternoon visiting, then I was to speak at their Monday night prayer meeting. To arrive on time, we had to leave the house no later than 11 a.m.

But everything went wrong that morning. The phone rang incessantly. Someone had to take the dog to the vet. My secretary called and reminded me I had promised to get a short article in the mail no later than noon. And to top it all off, my wife, Jackie, decided we should stop by and pick up her mother to go with us.

We were already an hour late when we finally got our bags packed and jumped in the car. Only then did we discover it was nearly out of gas—which meant another ten minutes' delay. Then we had to pick up Jackie's mother—another fifteen minutes. By the time we were on the interstate we were an hour and a half late.

"We better stop and call ahead and let Len and Catherine know we're running late," Jackie said. "It will be at least three-thirty before we get there."

"There's a phone booth at the next exit," I said. "I'll wait in the car while you make the call."

Jackie looked at me. "Why don't I wait in the car while you call? That should be a man's job. Anyway, it's raining."

"If I called I'd probably blame you for making us late," I said, ignoring her objections.

"Why blame anyone?" my simplistic wife asked, looking at me innocently through her big glasses. "Why not just say we were late getting away?"

I have a terrible time with questions like that. We drove silently for almost a mile, listening to the slap-slap of the worn-out windshield blades. "If I don't blame someone then I'll be criticized," I finally confessed. "I can't stand being criticized."

"You know Len isn't going to criticize you," Jackie said.

"Well, he'll think criticism, even if he doesn't say it," I said.

We pulled up at the phone booth and with an "I wish you'd grow up one of these days," Jackie got out of the car in the rain and called Len to break the news.

No problem. It turned out our friends were running late themselves. Even so, I couldn't help but wonder how I would ever make it in life unless I had someone to blame things on—my wife, mother, or associates.

Maybe it's my insecurity. Maybe it's my fear of rejection. Whatever it is, in times past I have been devastated by criticism. Just the slightest correction would give me blinding headaches. And harsh criticism, the kind that comes when some angry woman calls on the phone and strikes at me from her own personal hurt—accusing me of insensitivity, thoughtlessness, and cruelty—would send me into a depression which could last for days.

Across the years I learned it was easier to run from criticism than cope with it. I would go to any length to escape having to hear it. If I knew the caller on the phone was going to criticize me, I would ask Jackie to take the call. Then I would go in the bathroom, turn on the water, and rattle

papers so I wouldn't have to hear what was being said. It was all a matter of evasion—putting up a huge smoke screen to blot out something unpleasant.

I have hidden in the back room of the house when I saw certain persons coming up the front walk. I have forced the children to answer the phone rather than face some irate critic on the other end of the line. I have refused to read letters from people I knew were writing to disagree with me. In fact, there were times when I even refused to open them, thinking if their criticisms remained in the envelope they wouldn't jump out and hurt me.

I have acted tough, played humble, and blamed others. I have used phrases like, "Gee, I didn't know anything about that." Or, "I tried to get the elders of the church to change that, but..." Or, "Remember, several editors tampered with it before it got into print."

For years I have refused to read published reviews of my books. Very early in my writing career I discovered I couldn't handle them. If the reviews were good, then I would swell up like a frog sitting on a rock in the middle of a pond. Despite my "Aw, shucks," response, inwardly I croaked with pride. There were times when I actually clipped a rave review and left it lying around the house so some visitor would see how important his host actually was.

On the other hand, if the reviews were bad—calling my style "juvenile," pointing out my lack of spiritual understanding, criticizing my limited vocabulary, or calling my writing, as one reviewer did, "at best, mediocre"—I would go to pieces. Either I would lie awake late into the night, thinking how I could answer the reviewer with sarcasm (I never did, however) or I would slip quietly into a deep depression vowing I would never again write another book or article.

Regardless of the flavor of the review, though, I was rendered ineffective. So, like the letters, phone calls, and angry people ringing my front door bell, I found it safer just to ignore them.

Running from unpleasantness in order to escape criticism is a problem nearly all of us have faced at one time or another.

At the weekly meeting of the Council of Elders in our church, one of the men asked the rest of us to pray for him. "I've been through a time of deep self-examination," he explained. "It started with a dream. In the dream I was standing in my house looking out at a huge oak tree in the front lawn. Its spreading branches gave shade to the entire house. As I looked, a man appeared with a big drill and bored a precise hole, about two inches in diameter, through the heart of the tree. From my position in the house I could see all the way through the oak tree. Shortly after that, the whole top of the tree toppled over, and the shade was gone."

As he spoke I looked around the room at the other men, examining their faces. All of them probably had some kind of interpretation for the dream, I thought. But the man speaking was a recognized expert in the area of dreams and their interpretation. The other men, like myself, remained silent—eager, no doubt, to see if their interpretation was the same as the expert's.

He went ahead to say that as he meditated on the dream, he realized the oak tree referred to character. And in his case, there was a hole through his character which represented some kind of flaw, or character deficiency.

"I knew what that hole was," he continued. "From childhood I have fought a battle to overcome a fierce tendency in my life—a tendency to tell people what they want to hear rather than tell them the truth."

His problem, of course, was obvious. To tell the truth means exposing yourself to evaluation by others. "Who do you think you are to correct me? Look at your own life!" In fact, once a man begins to tell the truth, he is often accused of judging, which opens the door for people to throw

Scripture verses back at him in machine gun style. “Judge not that ye be not judged.” “First cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye.”

Not only that, but telling the truth means running the risk of having to defend the truth—and of being criticized because of it. Therefore, sooner or later most of us find it easier to tell people what they want to hear, than to speak the truth.

“When I saw that,” he continued, “and when I brought the Lord into the setting, I realized He wanted to set me free from this damning tendency which has caused me to be a chronic liar when it came to speaking truth to others.”

He then told us that as he meditated on this subject, he asked himself the question, “When did this tendency begin?”

That stimulated his memory. He recalled a little scene when he was four years old. His family was living in Oregon at the time, and he was the youngest of nine children. He had a little playmate, a girl, who was about the same age. One day his mother discovered the two of them playing in the bathroom. It was an innocent experience, but somehow in their play activity they had gone into the bathroom and closed the door. As a result of this episode he was not only punished by his mother—who was a very loving woman—but was ridiculed and teased by his older brothers. From that time on, he said, he determined that in order to escape punishment and ridicule he would try to please people. This was easy to do since he had a wonderful mother whom he loved to please—even at the cost of telling the truth.

Listening to my friend talk about his problem—which was my problem too, even though my mother never caught me locked in the bathroom with a little girl—made me realize that the fear of criticism is a tremendously motivating force in the lives of most people. Afraid to face people because of how they might react, I either told lies or I reacted in anger—which was simply another defense mechanism.

I thought back to a time several weeks before. It was at another elders’ meeting. We were discussing a new project I felt the church should assume. Several times during the meeting I glanced over at my friend. His brow was wrinkled and he twisted his hands nervously as he asked a few questions. I sensed he was reluctant to give his approval. Had I been more discerning I would have realized he felt we were heading in the wrong direction, yet his desire to please those around him, especially those in authority, was even larger than his desire to speak truth and save us from difficult consequences. Thus he simply sat back, wrinkled his brow, and said very little.

However, the next day he left a note in my mailbox. It was a blistering kind of warning. He pointed out several legitimate objections to my project—things I sincerely wished he had brought up in the meeting the day before. He then concluded by saying we were moving too fast and needed to slow down.

I was shocked, not so much by his conclusions (which I recognized as valid) but by his boldness. It seemed to be out of character for my soft-spoken friend.

However, my own reluctance to engage in a face-to-face confrontation kept me from doing what I should have done—which was to call him on the phone and say, “Hey, what’s this all about?”

As I considered his weakness—the hole in the tree, so to speak—I realized my own hole was even bigger. As far back as I could remember, I had a difficult time saying no. Like my friend, I said yes when I should have said no because I wished to please.

Especially was this true when it came to personal confrontations which might put me on the defensive. The problem often surfaced in strange places, such as filling out my calendar schedule for the coming year.

I had told my secretary, Laura Watson, that I was going to take only three days a month for outside speaking engagements. The rest of the time I planned to stay home, writing and fulfilling my duties to the congregation in Melbourne.

Laura greeted my announcement with a skeptical smile.

She knew me.

Sure enough, before long my calendar had filled up—far beyond my planned three days a month. My problem was most apparent when my friends approached me, asking me to come speak, conduct a seminar, or teach at a conference. Perfect strangers I could handle. But when it came to a long-time friend who put pressure on me, I would invariably give in and tell him yes. Before long I had an out-of-town trip planned during almost every week for the coming year. There was hardly time left to come home and speak to my children, much less sit down and write a book.

“Why don’t you let me handle your engagements?” Laura asked in desperation. “Why is it so hard for you to say no to all these people?”

“I hate to hurt their feelings,” I said.

“I think there’s more to it than that,” she said with a knowing look.

I thought of the words of Isaiah, words which I had longed to appropriate in my life, but had been unable to do so because I feared criticism.

The Lord God has given me his words of wisdom so that I may know what I should say to all these weary ones. Morning by morning he wakens me and opens my understanding to his will. The Lord God has spoken to me and I have listened; I do not rebel nor turn away. I give my back to the whip, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard. I do not hide from shame—they spit in my face.

Because the Lord God helps me, I will not be dismayed: therefore, I have set my face like flint to do his will, and I know that I will triumph. He who gives me justice is near. Who will dare to fight against me now? Where are my enemies? Let them appear! See, the Lord God is for me! Who shall declare me guilty? All my enemies shall be destroyed like old clothes eaten up by moths! (Isaiah 50:4-9 The Living Bible).

I realized I would never have this confidence as long as I ran from confrontation. Some place along the path I would have to stop and set my face like flint to do His will—and speak His truth, no matter the consequences.

In the meantime, I told Laura to go ahead and tell everyone who called, wanting me to write their book or come speak to their assembly, that I had taken all the work I could for the foreseeable future.

But it wasn’t the busyness that was causing me to set my secretary out in front like a shield to catch all the spears and darts—it was my own cowardliness. I was afraid to say no. I knew the minute I allowed myself to get into a face-to-face confrontation I would buckle. I knew the moment I started speaking truth I would have to bear the consequences.

It finally happened. An old acquaintance, a man from Michigan who had on several occasions in the past tried to get me to come speak at his church, finally got through to me. I was

sitting at Laura's desk when the phone rang. She was busy at the filing cabinet so I answered the phone.

"This must be of the Lord," my old acquaintance boomed. "Every time I've called before I've gotten your secretary. She refuses to let me get through to you. I kept telling my wife I knew you weren't that busy—at least not so busy you didn't have time for your old friends."

I felt the fear knotting my stomach. "I've been out of town a lot," I stammered.

"See, I knew that was the case. Some guys are afraid to answer their phone. They've outgrown us little fellows. They surround themselves with all kinds of functionaries who do their dirty work for them. But I knew you weren't like that. You're too real. Too honest. You'd never push your old friends aside just because you've become famous." I gave a little nervous laugh on the phone. Laura had finished at the filing cabinet and was standing across the desk, looking at me. Her lips were pursed, causing a little white ring around the mouth.

"L-e-t m-e t-a-l-k t-o h-i-m," she mouthed.

But it was too late.

"You've been putting me off for years," my old friend rattled on. "I'll not take no for an answer. You've been saying yes to everyone else. Now just name the date. Anytime between now and the end of the year."

"I can't come on a Sunday," I said nervously.

I heard Laura sigh. She was shaking her head vigorously. But I couldn't back down, not now. He'd criticize me.

"You don't have to come on a Sunday. Just give us three days during the week."

Laura was busy scribbling something on a pad. She held it up for me to read. "TELL HIM YOU'LL CHECK YOUR CALENDAR AND WRITE HIM BACK."

I felt a great weight lift from my shoulders.

"I don't have my calendar with me," I stammered truthfully. "I'll check and see if I have a clear date and write you back."

"Okay!" he said laughing. "Now remember, I won't take no for an answer. I'll expect a letter from you within the week."

I hung up the phone and sat staring at the receiver like it was a rattlesnake which had tried to bite me and I had finally managed to stun it with a stick. Suddenly it rang again. I leaped out of the chair and motioned for Laura to pick it up. I wasn't about to get struck again.

She handled it like the pro she is.

"I'm sorry. Mr. Buckingham would love to come, especially since you're an old friend. But he has promised the Lord to stay home and work on several book projects and to spend some time with his family and the local church. He's taken all the engagements he can handle for the foreseeable future. Why don't you write him a letter and tell him you love him? That would mean a lot since he's under a great deal of pressure right now."

"Why can't I do that?" I moaned, when she hung up the phone after a pleasant goodbye conversation.

"Because you're a coward," Laura said, matter-of-factly.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you know what is right. You know what God has told you to do. But you're afraid to tell people."

"You're right," I groaned.

"What are you going to write the man in Michigan?"

“I’ll have no trouble with that,” I said confidently. “I’ll simply write him and tell him I have established certain priorities and cannot come to Michigan this year.”

“Do you feel you are supposed to go to Michigan next year?”

“No.”

“Are you going to say that in the letter?”

“Well, er, ah, probably not. It’s better to say my calendar is full and he should contact me next year.”

“Then you’ll have to go through this whole thing again next year. Why don’t you just tell him the truth? Tell him you are trying to be obedient to God and do not feel he is leading you to come to Michigan.”

“But that makes it sound like I don’t like him,” I said.

Laura took a keen look at me. “Do you like him?”

“Sure. He’s not only an old friend, but I feel he’s a devoted man of God.”

“If you really like him, tell him the truth. If you’re going to lie to anyone, lie to your enemies. Not your friends.”

I thought of what my fellow elder had said about wanting to please people more than he wanted to tell the truth. My tree had a hole in it too. In fact, it had already fallen down on top of my house. From some place out of the past I remember my father quoting Sir Walter Scott: “Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive!”

I wondered, though, if Sir Walter had to contend with criticism the way I do.

In short, for a number of years, I did everything I could to escape criticism.

I don’t do that anymore. At least, I don’t do it as much as I used to. Instead, I have worked out a system which is helping me solve my problem. Not only that, but the system has helped me overcome a number of character flaws which I figured I’d just have to carry with me to my grave. It’s not that I now enjoy being criticized. A person has to have a sick mind to enjoy that kind of thing—especially if the criticism is justified. But I am learning after all these years how to cope with criticism.

And that’s what this book is all about.

Coping with Criticism

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