

# Coping With Criticism

by JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

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Criticism — even that which is given in love — hurts. It hurts because it demands change. And very few of us have reached the place of spiritual maturity where we welcome change as a way of life. In fact, one of the best ways to measure your spiritual maturity is the amount of pain you feel when you come in contact with a new idea. So, we fight change. We put up defenses which protect us from it. We grow comfortable, sometimes even "set", in our life style. Unaware that we are offensive to others, we view any criticism of our life style as an attack upon something sacred. Thus we react. Often with anger.

When your thumb is hit with a hammer your body reacts. If the blow is hard enough your stomach, lungs, mouth, throat — even the fingers that weren't hit — begin to ache and throb. So it is with receiving criticism. If the critic's knife is sharp enough, or if he probes deep enough into your life style, you begin to hurt. It is an automatic reaction.

But the Spirit-filled life is never lived on the basis of reaction. Jesus never RE-acted to criticism. Instead, He acted upon it. Most of us handle criticism fairly well if everything else is in good working order. But if you've had an argument with your wife over the breakfast table, your car broke down on the way to work and some motorist shook his fist at you because you were blocking the entrance to the expressway, you had to push your car two blocks to a service station, you snagged your coat in the elevator door and tore off the sleeve, and then your boss was waiting for you when you

came in the door because you didn't finish your sales report the day before — well, you're liable to react to his criticism. In fact, you're liable to punch him in the teeth, turn over a filing cabinet on his desk, and resign your job on the spot.

This, however, is not reacting to your boss's criticism. This is reacting to the garbage piled up in your life — a problem I addressed in *Risky Living*. Jesus never reacted like that because he didn't have any garbage cluttering up his subconscious. As a result he was able to hear his critics clearly, and respond to them positively — with love and a few stories.

Someplace I read of a little boy who was punished by his mother. The child reacted with anger and the mother locked him in her clothes closet until he cooled off. Instead of cooling off he heated up. Finally the noise in the closet subsided and there was a long period when the mother heard nothing. She opened the door to check on him. He was sitting on the floor.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He looked up, his eyes still blazing with anger.

"I've spit on your dress. I've spit on your coat. I've spit on your hats. I've spit on your shoes. I'm just sitting here waitin' for more spit."

I remember a medical doctor who had suffered a severe heart attack once saying, "I am at the mercy of the man who can make me angry."

And he was. Several months after he made that statement another doctor criticized him at a hospital staff meeting. He rose to his feet, seething

with rage, had another heart attack, and dropped to the floor dead.

Anger is one reaction none of us can afford. Spit is too expensive to waste on shoes. Returning love for hate is not only spiritual — it just might save our lives.

Several months ago I visited a saintly old couple who are in the sunset years of life. In fact, the old man is now bedridden, unable to move off his bed without help. Although his mind is still sharp and his spirits good, he needs 24-hour-a-day care for his physical needs.

I had dropped by their house after learning that his only son by a previous marriage — the last of his blood line — had been killed in an accident. I knew the news had come as a great shock and I wanted to reaffirm my love and pray for him. After a few minutes with him beside his bed, I prayed, and then walked back into the kitchen where his wife of many years was busy peeling carrots.

"I'll be back," I told her, squeezing her arm.

"That's all right," she said sharply. "I know how busy you are." She pulled away from me and grabbed more carrots to peel.

"Why Dora," I said, surprised. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she lied. "Just get on out of here so I can do my work. Nobody cares about me anyway. Willard gets all the attention. I'm just a slave, a nobody."

"Dora," I said gently, reaching out for her again. "That's not so. I care. A lot of people care."



"Oh, no, they don't," she said, her eyes flashing as she turned to me. "Nobody knows how hard it is on me. All they think about is Willard back there on that bed. They don't have to do his cooking, clean up after him, give him his shots, answer the phone, clean this house. They just walk by me like I didn't even exist."

Once again she pulled away from my grasp and turned on the water in the sink. Her voice was cracking.

"I stood at the door and listened while you prayed for Willard," she said, her back to me to hide her face. "I'm glad you came and I know he appreciated it. But your entire prayer was for him. You never even mentioned me..." Her voice broke with anger and she threw her carrots into the sink.

Everything in me wanted to speak out in defense of what I had done. Willard was the one with the grief problem. It was his son who had been killed. This was a time when he needed ministry. Couldn't she understand that. He was back on his bed, his heart broken, and she was in the kitchen feeling sorry for herself because I hadn't mentioned her name in my prayer. What childishness!

I realized, though, that a reaction like that on my part would only drive her deeper into her shell of self-pity. Even though her criticism of what I had done was not justified, I needed to receive it in love. Not only did I need to understand why she felt the way she did, I needed to try to help her. Additional defensiveness on my part, even if it was tenderly given, would do nothing to help. It would but drive the wedge of divisiveness deeper into the wound.

I stepped up behind her as she busied herself at the sink, slipping my arms around her waist. "Dora, dear Dora," I said. "I love you so much!"

She turned and melted into my arms. Sobbing. Her gray head against my chest. "Forgive me for being a cranky old woman," she sobbed. "I don't know what we would do without people like you."

The confrontation was over. It had been conquered by love.

The most difficult thing in the world is to look beyond our critic to his need. A black preacher friend of mine says, "Because I can see the potential I can tolerate the apparent." In other words, he has mastered the problem of reacting to his critics because he sees beyond the outer appearance to the

inner need — a need he is called to fill even in the lives of his accusers.

It is difficult to move beyond the guilt and condemnation that criticism often dumps on us. How easy it is to remember in vivid detail the face of our critic, to remind ourselves over and over of the exact words he used when he was denouncing us. We remember the set of his mouth and the glint of his eye. We remember the way his knuckles went white while he was talking to us. And we react to the critic far more than we do to his criticism.

In the process of this, we confuse the criticism with the critic. Not only are we unable to see the critic the way he really is, we aren't able to hear the criticism the way we should. Like many differences of opinions on issues, we allow the confrontation to digress from principle to personality, and begin to throw knives at each other, rather than at the issues. If we are to grow, and if we are to help others grow, we must quickly learn to separate the issues from personalities. Otherwise we excuse ourselves from ever hearing the message because we see flaws in the messenger.

Most reaction to hostile criticism comes when we are vulnerable, either at fault or weary from some other battle. Unable to cope adequately, we react in anger. Far better is to react by admitting our inabilities. If I lose my composure, get a twitch in my face, raise my voice in anger, or feel my eyes dilating, then I know I am out of spiritual control. I may have had a good word to share but if I lose my composure then I become ineffective. At such times there is no other way out except to bow my head, let the other person take the lead, and respond with love. Such a procedure not only disarms my critic, but kills the argument. After all, how can you argue with someone who admits he was wrong.

There is a great deal of tension in the description John gives of Jesus — a man "full of grace and truth." Grace is at one end of the spectrum — truth at the other. Jesus is the bridge between the two, giving us the ability to cope gracefully with truth which smiles — or sneers — from our critics. ↗

*Jamie Buckingham, who says he has received so much criticism he is now an expert on the subject, lives in Melbourne, Florida. He is the author of 27 books, the latest (to be released in early 1979 by Logos International) on this subject.*





