

How I'm learning to cope with criticism

Are you able to look beyond your critic and to hear what God is saying?

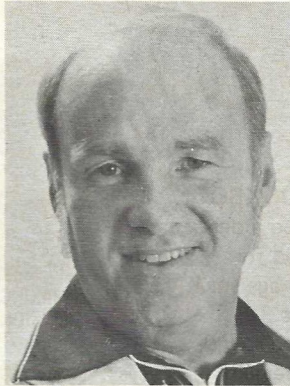
By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

FOR YEARS I "coped" with criticism by sneering. "Well, I'll just consider the source." Especially did I use this tactic against book critics who had never written books themselves, against critics of my children who had no children of their own, or critics of my unconventional speaking techniques who had never spoken in public.

It was the same reaction I often had to those who had not been baptized in the Holy Spirit — yet criticized those of us who had. "Humph! What do they know about it? What makes them experts on an experience they've never had themselves?" And so I would write off my critics with a shrug — and a sneer.

Then I remembered something my professor of military science once said when I was in ROTC back in college. We had just come off the drill field where my marching platoon, "The Pershing Rifles," had just been given a bad grade for their drill performance. The judges were from another school and one of them was a fat little fellow with glasses who couldn't move from "Right Shoulder Arms" to "Left Shoulder Arms" without bouncing his rifle off his huge stomach. To have imagined him at "Present Arms" was downright ridiculous.

Jamie Buckingham, author of *Run Baby Run* with Nicky Cruz and *Tramp for the Lord* with Corrie ten Boom, is appreciated for his transparently honest writing. Adapted from *Coping with Criticism*, copyright © 1978 by Logos International. Used by permission.



When our ROTC instructor gave us the results of the judging — a "4" out of a possible score of "10" — I blew up.

"I don't mind being judged as a poor performer," I said angrily, "but I resent the fact that one of the judges probably hasn't seen his knees in seven years except when he fell down walking across the drill field. What does a fat fellow like that know about precision maneuvers?"

The wise old military professor said, "You know, a man doesn't have to be a butcher to tell if a steak tastes good or not."

He was right. Many years later, as I began to investigate why I wasn't able to cope with criticism, I realized one of my problems was caused by spending too much time looking at the critic.

How easy it is to shrug off a person with "He doesn't know what he's talking about," and never come face to face with the criticism as God intends.

If you are going to cope with criticism you need to look beyond the critic and see if God is trying to speak to you through some very unlikely person.

King David may have won more battles than any other king in history. Yet his victories went to his head and eventually he began to believe he was a law unto himself. He lusted after the wife of one of his soldiers and when he realized he could not claim her for his wife, he sent her husband to the front lines where he would be killed. He then took Bathsheba as his own. God doesn't tolerate sin in the lives of

those He has chosen. After letting David think he had gotten away with it, God sent a very unlikely man into his life, a mountain prophet called Nathan. Nathan had been David's friend, a valued man of wisdom in the court. But this time, instead of giving David advice, he turned on him in fury. "The wrath of God is upon you," he said to David with burning eyes and shaking finger.

Instead of a sneer, a shrug, or anger, David looked beyond the man and received the message. The result was Psalm 51, the greatest treatise on repentance and contrition ever written.

Many years later another prophet of God came to another Jewish king. The situation was similar. King Herod had taken the wife of his brother. But Herod was unable to receive the justified criticism which came from John the Baptist. His way of coping with criticism was to have the critic put to death.

If you fasten your eyes on the one bringing the criticism, you are apt to miss what God is saying. Wisdom, on the other hand, is being able to see as God sees. God does not look upon the outer appearance, but upon the heart.

Often we need to step back from the critic, close our eyes, and see if God might be saying something to us which we are too deaf to hear.

One of my favorite stories is about two psychiatrists who rode the same elevator to work each morning. One of them got off on the fifth floor. The other went up to floor nine. Every morning the elevator operator would greet the two doctors as they got on the elevator precisely at 8:58 A.M. And every morning, when he stopped at the fifth floor, the first psychiatrist would turn to the second psychiatrist, spit in his face, and walk off the elevator. The door would close, the second psychiatrist would take out his handkerchief and wipe his face and, without ever saying a word, get off when the door opened at the ninth floor.

This went on every morning, Monday through Friday, for several weeks. Finally the elevator operator could stand it no longer. After watching the first psychiatrist spit on the second one and then get off on floor five, the operator turned to the second doctor, who was wiping his face with his handkerchief.

"Why does he do that?" he almost shouted.

The elevator stopped at floor nine and the door opened. "I don't know," said the second psychiatrist, heading for his office. "That's his problem. Not mine."

The story rings with spiritual truth. It really is the first psychiatrist's problem. Granted, we might not like to have spit on our face, or nails driven through our hands — but wisdom allows us to look beyond the spit, and leave the spitter in God's hands.

My friend Jim Underwood heads an organization called the National Institute of Christian Financial Planning. He and his financial counselors hold seminars and counsel Christians who need financial advice. In personal counseling they often have to criticize a person's life style. For instance, a couple may have developed a style of deficit spending — that is, they always buy on credit and are never able to save anything. Then there is a crisis in their life, perhaps the husband gets demoted and suddenly they aren't able to pay their bills. At the same time, they are going right ahead with their plans to install a swimming pool — an obvious luxury. Hearing this, the financial counselor has to point out they are not only spending their money unwisely, but they have been building their lives on a style which must be changed. This often brings a violent reaction — especially if the man has been bragging that he is a financial wizard, or if the advice given by the financial counselor is exactly the same thing his wife has been giving him. Sometimes the reaction is so violent the people being counseled even turn on the counselor and blame him for all their problems.

After several years of dealing with people in crisis situations, Jim has developed a formula — which he calls R & R — to help measure Christian maturity. R & R is the time between the point of Reaction and the point of Recovery, and it applies to all crisis situations in life. How long does it take

you to move from the point of reaction which takes place when someone slaps your face, to the point of recovery when you turn the other cheek? How long does it take you to move from the point of reaction when you hear someone has wronged you, to the point of recovery when you forgive? How long does it take you to move from the point of reaction when someone criticizes you for something you have done wrong, to the point of recovery when you accept the criticism without rejecting the critic?

The closer these two points become, the more mature you are.

In some groups there is a high level of honesty. We have a number of home groups in the larger church in Melbourne. These are "speak-the-truth-in-love" groups, presided over by a home church pastor who is so committed to the group that he will not hurt them by lying to them. The same kind of honesty and transparency exists among the members of the home church. In such groups people are able to sit down and discuss the truth in love. Even though they often react with anger, depression, self-righteousness, or self-justification, they have learned to move rapidly from the point of reaction to the point of recovery. In some instances where a man might have taken months to forgive a business associate for letting him down, he has now learned to do it in just a week instead. That's drawing R & R closer together.

Husbands and wives often find it difficult to move from reaction to recovery without severely damaging one another in the process. But Christian maturity — the ability to see as God sees — moves us closer to our goal of being able to cope with criticism.

Ever since Jim told me about his R & R test, I have been using it to measure my own Christian maturity. So far, on a scale of ten, I'm averaging about four and a half. My biggest problems, I'm discovering, come with those who are closest to me.

Several weeks ago, after an elders' meeting in our home, several of us were standing around our den talking. Jackie, my wife, really looks forward to gatherings like this. Although we meet a lot of people in our travels and have a lot of warm relationships with a number of people in Melbourne, she doesn't have very many close friends who spend time with her —

people with the same interests, who think as she thinks, who are willing to sit and listen rather than simply using her as a sounding board for their troubles. It's hard, being married to a writer who gets lots of attention.

On this evening Jackie began a long, involved story about something which had happened to us when we had been on a trip the week before. I stood beside her, fidgeting. I glanced at the others standing around listening. "She's going to take all night with this story," I thought. "And she'll probably miss the real point of it before she's through."

So I waited until she paused for breath and I broke in, "What she's trying to say is..." I went ahead with the story, boiling it down and hitting the punch line right on the nose.

Later, after the other folks had gone home, Ray and Wanda Baker lingered. "I need to talk to you," Ray said.

We all went back in the den and sat down. Ray, who is a former seminary professor, didn't mince words. "You know I love you as my brother. I also love Jackie as my sister. You deeply hurt my sister tonight. Don't ever do it again."

It wasn't a threat. Just a straightforward statement of fact.

"What do you mean?" I honestly had no idea.

"Being married to a professional storyteller isn't easy," Ray continued, his face stern. "But has it ever occurred to you that Jackie may want to tell her own story every once in a while? Tonight she was doing a good job telling her story. The rest of us were genuinely interested in her viewpoint. But you grew irritated at her and just took the story away — telling it yourself. This time I'm telling you in private. If it ever happens again, and I'm present, I'll interrupt you and publicly correct you."

Five years ago, before we began moving in this kind of honesty, I would have given serious consideration to separating his teeth — and probably settled for smiling and later quietly determining never to let him into my life again. This time, however, although I could feel my cheeks burning, I realized he was right — and I was wrong. It took only a matter of seconds for me to move through reaction to recovery. It wasn't the first time I had stepped on her like that.

But by God's grace, it would be the last. I promised Ray — and Jackie. I graded myself seven and a half.

Jackie graded me an even ten.

Very few of us can receive heavy criticism without staggering. There is no way to escape some hurt when we are accused — especially if the accusation is accurate and hits one of our vulnerable parts. It is only when we remember that everything which comes into the life of the Christian is designed by a loving heavenly Father to form us into the image of Jesus Christ that we can find the proper perspective for coping with criticism. Just as all of those in authority are under his control, so he also controls the critics — and their criticism.

That is one of the reasons the Christian needs to stay "prayed up." Most of us don't have an opportunity to know ahead of time that criticism is coming. When the old soldiers went into battle they knew almost exactly when the confrontation would take place. So they put on their armor, said their prayers, and went out to meet the enemy. But with criticism it is likely to come at the most unlikely moments — nearly always catching us unawares. Therefore, spiritual armor needs to be worn at all times so when the criticism comes — as it surely will in the life of every Christian — we will not turn tail and run, looking for a rock to hide under. Our feet are already planted on the solid rock of Jesus Christ, and nothing, not even criticism which strips us naked and leaves us exposed for all the world to see, can move us from where we stand. □

SUNDAY MORNING

Enter
Invoke, confess, affirm

Up and down
Follow
the Order of Service.

Offer, intone, attend
Depart.

You were there?
Somehow
I missed You.

—Wanda M. Trawick