

13. Grace under fire

July 22, 2012

There is one thing that the most of us are very good at doling out, but we hate to receive. Do you know what it is? Criticism. You know what they say, "Everybody's critic." We all have two cents, and we all have noses.

Elbert Hubbard, a 19th Century American writer said, "To avoid criticism, do nothing, say nothing, be nothing." There is no way you can avoid criticism as long as you live in this world. Even God cannot avoid being criticized. But how we handle those criticisms makes us be good followers of Jesus Christ or not.

Even before His birth, Jesus was already ridiculed and criticized by those who thought His mother Mary had a sexual relationship with someone before her marriage with Joseph. Throughout His entire life and even after His death, He was criticized and still being criticized by believers and unbelievers alike.

As you all know there are two types of criticisms – constructive and destructive. Though we may not like to hear constructive criticisms at the beginning, if we are wise, we should take them into our hearts and become better. The Book of Proverbs is full of constructive counsels. I heard from someone that he reads the Book of Proverbs one chapter a day everyday. A very good discipline, I must say.

Then, there is destructive criticism. It is full of poison and it has one purpose only – to destroy the other person's inner strength and to discourage one's heart.

After a church service in which the pastor had preached about spiritual gifts, he was greeted at the door by a woman who said, "Pastor, I believe I have the gift of criticism." He responded, "Do you remember the person in Jesus' parable who had the one talent in Matthew 25? Do you recall what that man did with it?" "Yes," replied the woman, "he went out and buried it." With a smile, the pastor suggested, "Go, and do likewise!"

Out of all the spiritual gifts that were mentioned in the NT, there is no gift of criticism, ever. If you find it in your bible, that bible ain't the Holy Bible we use.

Job's three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar thought they had the gift of criticism. So they exercised it time after time instead of the gift of encouragement which Job could really use.

This morning, I believe that the Lord is going to teach us how to handle criticism with grace – the criticism that sometimes makes us feel like we are being burned by the fire of a hot furnace of life. So I titled today's study – Grace under fire.

A. THE THIRD ROUND

Job 22:5-11 Is not your wickedness great, And your iniquity without end? 6 For you have taken pledges from your brother for no reason, And stripped the naked of their clothing. 7 You have not given the weary water to drink, And you have withheld bread from the hungry. 8 But the mighty man possessed the land, And the honorable man dwelt in it. 9 You have sent widows away empty, And the strength of the fatherless was crushed. 10 Therefore snares are all around you, And sudden fear troubles you, 11 Or darkness so that you cannot see; And an abundance of water covers you.

In the third round of debate, Eliphaz stepped into the ring once more, swinging both fists. He started with the same song, third verse as he proceeded to make more false accusations and destructive criticisms against Job.

Like any effective prosecutor, Eliphaz had the case well in hand and his brief all prepared. He first accused Job of the sin of pride and covetousness, and followed by lack of mercy and compassion. From v12 to v20, he also accused Job of hypocrisy.

Fluent in his delivery, but a couple of things were lacking, like the actual witness and evidence. All of Eliphaz's premises – the idea of all evil people suffer right away due to their sins, so Job had to be guilty – were wrong, so his conclusion became invalid.

The whole thing was pure fabrication, a feeble attempt to discredit a godly man who had helped many people. Can you imagine that the people who were standing around and listening to the discussion must have been shocked when they heard these accusations against their neighbor Job whom they respected?

Hypocrites, like Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar do not pursue their desired spiritual goals, they just want others to think that they did. What they say and what they do while no one looks never meet. I like what Stephen Charnock, a 17th Century English Puritan preacher said, "It is a sad thing to be Christians at a supper, heathens in our shops, and devils in our closets."

Listen, if criticism is not given lovingly and with an honest desire to help, it can be cruel and destructive as I said it before. This verse from chapter 19 of the Book of Leviticus gives us warnings against spreading slander and nursing hatred.

Leviticus 19:17 'You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him.

But constructive criticism must be taken with welcome signs in our hearts. We will talk about that a little later.

B. A COUPLE OF THINGS ABOUT CRITICISM

Let's think about a couple of things before we go on to chapter 23.

1) Giving criticism

We can determine when we should criticize or when we shouldn't by asking ourselves three questions:

- Am I motivated by a desire to help and edify the other person?
- Am I planning to face him honestly, but gently?
- Am I doing this for the Lord, or because I enjoy being critical?

If our goal is to help, if our motives are loving, and if our desire is to please God, then go ahead and criticize with all the love and gentleness. If we can't pass these tests, keep quiet.

Please note that the difference in personal preferences should not be the base for our criticism. For example, some Christians love old fashion hymns of yesteryear. Good for you, I do, too. There are some deep, deep theologies in there. Then, another group of believers love Christian chorus worship songs from 1970s and 80s, so do I. The other group would say, "We love Christian contemporary and Christian head banging music." I love the Christian contemporary music, but I am not so much into the Christian head banging thingy. Worship is for God alone, not for us.

Do you know that our assistant pastor Jack Lavery loves all the Christian rap music. When he goes home, he changes his clothing to his favorite baggy pants, shirt, and baggy hood, puts on a baseball cap sideways, wears big sunglasses, necklaces and earrings, applies temporary tattoos on his body and raps Jesus all the way down to his grocery store. You probably don't believe me, so here is his photo.

Jesus taught us to be in unity, not uniformity. Not everyone has to like what you like or what I like. We need to refocus our minds from the horizontal to the vertical. We need to rise above the nonsense of human viewpoint and tedious worries about non-eternal issues. We need to get on with thoughts that really matter in Jesus Christ.

I like what the Great Reformer Martin Luther said, "In essentials unity. In non-essentials liberty. In all things charity."

2) Receiving criticism

Every critique provides an opportunity to grow. Forget the critic. It's far more important to consider the criticism, especially if it comes from more than one source.

Sometimes love prompts our friends to give us counsel that isn't easy for us to hear.
Proverbs 27:6 Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.

The Hebrew language that Solomon uses in the first half of the verse suggests this literal translation: "Faithful are the wounds caused by the one who loves you."

Sometimes we receive emotional or spiritual "bruises" from the words of those who genuinely love us, care about us, and want to encourage us to grow. These bruises from friends stay with us for a long time, but usually, if they've been offered in love and with discretion, we're the better for having received them. Such faithful bruising helps us more in our walk with God than false flattery or a phony embrace from someone who has their own best interests, not ours, at heart.

If you were Job, how would you respond to these destructive criticisms from Eliphaz? In chapter 23 and 24, he answered him with grace. What a godly man that he was!

C. COME FORTH AS GOLD

Job 23:8-12 "Look, I go forward, but He is not there, And backward, but I cannot perceive Him; 9 When He works on the left hand, I cannot behold Him; When He turns to the right hand, I cannot see Him. 10 But He knows the way that I take; When He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold. 11 My foot has held fast to His steps; I have kept His way and not turned aside. 12 I have not departed from the commandment of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food.

Do you ever feel as if you cannot find God or that He seems so far away?

John 14:20 At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you.

1 Corinthians 6:17 But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him.

1 Peter 5:7 casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.

What kinds of promises of God do you find from these verses? The love of God.

Great theologian Matthew Henry said, "The God of Israel, the Savior, is sometimes a God that hides Himself, but never a God that absents Himself; sometimes in the dark, but never at a distance." A great comment.

But how does a mere man go about finding God? If Job went forward or backward which mean east or west in the Jewish terms, to the left or to the right which meant north or south, he could not see God or even catch a quick glimpse of Him. Of course, God is present everywhere as the Bible mentions many times but Job wanted a personal meeting with God. He had questions to ask and arguments to present.

God knew where Job was – in the furnace as he said in v10. But it was a furnace of God's appointment, not because of Job's sin; and God would use Job's affliction to purify him and make him a better man as He does to all of His believers. This is not the only answer to the question, "Why do the righteous suffer?" but it is one of the best encouragements to the sufferers.

Scripture often uses the image of a furnace to describe God's purifying ministry through suffering. Here are some examples – Isaiah 48:10; Deuteronomy 4:20; Psalm 66:10; 1 Peter 1:6-7 and 4:12. Receiving and enduring criticisms can be like being inside of the furnace of life.

I have a BBQ gas grill in the patio like many of you. By experience, if I turn on the gas in full blast, in about 12 minutes, I know that the temperature of the inside of the grill goes up to 450 degrees. Then, I slab down our steaks on the grill. I give about 8 minute on the first side, another 4 minutes on the other side. That gives me 'medium rare' status. But time to time, I mess up and steaks get too done or still too rare. But our God never has that problem like me.

When God puts His own people into the furnace, He keeps His eye on the thermostat and His hand on the power switch. He exactly knows how long and how much we can endure. We may question why He does it to begin with, or why He doesn't turn down the heat or even turn it off; but our questions are only evidences of unbelief. Gold does not fear the fire. The furnace can only make the gold purer and brighter.

Listen carefully my brothers and sisters. Our Lord was nailed to the cross by His critics; you can count on being nailed to the wall. It's helpful to see each ordeal that way – as being crucified with Christ.

Some people go into the furnace of affliction, and it burns them; others go in, and the experience purifies them. What makes the difference? Their attitude toward the Word of God and the will of God. If we are nourished by the Word and submit to His will, the furnace experience, painful as it may be, will refine us and make us better. But if we resist God's will and fail to feed on His truth, the furnace experience will only burn us and make us bitter.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) When we are criticized, resist the temptation to explain everything.

If the critics have ill intentions, they are not going to listen to us anyway; but if the critics have good intentions, we'd better be quiet and listen to them.

2) When we are criticized, focus on future benefits in faith, not the present pain.

As Job maintained his integrity and innocence during his sufferings, because he knew that he would eventually receive a reward for enduring his sufferings, we must keep our eyes on the unseen eternal glory through Jesus Christ.

3) When we are criticized, embrace the sovereignty of God.

If you tend to think that you cannot embrace someone whom you don't understand, look at your spouse. You have loving relationship in spite of the fact that you don't know everything there is to know about your spouse. Your spouse still loves you even though he or she knows many of your short comings.

Our God loves us even though He knows everything about us. And He has nothing but the best for us. There is absolutely no reason we should not trust His sovereignty.