

11. Living excellence above criticism

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When Christian Herter was governor of Massachusetts of yesteryear, he was running hard for a second term in office. One day, after a busy morning chasing votes (and no lunch) he arrived at a church barbecue picnic. It was late afternoon and Herter was famished.

As Herter moved down the serving line, he held out his plate to the woman serving chicken. She put a piece on his plate and turned to the next person in line.

"Excuse me," Governor Herter said, "do you mind if I have another piece of chicken?"

"Sorry," the woman told him. "I'm supposed to give one piece of chicken to each person."

"But I'm starved," the governor said.

"Sorry," the woman said again. "Only one per person."

Governor Herter was a modest and unassuming man, but he decided that this time he would throw a little weight around.

"Do you know who I am?" he said. "I am the governor of this state."

"Do you know who I am?" the woman said. "I'm the lady in charge of the chicken. Move along, mister."

In the closing chapters Paul defended his apostolic authority. He had fallen under severe criticism and hostile attack. This was his opportunity to respond and address issues of his identity in Christ Jesus. In this section Paul gave a clear justification for his ministry. His authority came from God and not from other humans. He also rebuked those false teachers who refuted his ministry and Christ's teachings. In contrast, he held up his own credentials. He listed his visions, revelations and sufferings as evidence of the authenticity of his ministry. By the end of the letter Paul's defense was irrefutable and his ministry was vindicated. No one could deny that he was not an apostle of Jesus Christ called to preach the Gospel to all who had ears to hear.

A. MATTERS OF THE SPIRITUAL WARFARE

2 Corinthians 10:1-6 Now I, Paul, myself am pleading with you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ--who in presence am lowly among you, but being absent am bold toward you. 2 But I beg you that when I am present I may not be bold with that confidence by which I intend to be bold against some, who think of us as if we walked according to the flesh. 3 For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. 4 For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, 5 casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, 6 and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled.

In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul brought this battle to the forefront of his readers' minds and gave them a strategy for fighting it.

Ephesians 6:10-11 Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

The Greek word for 'wiles' is 'methodeia', which means "to act craftily." Satan's deceitful nature is his greatest weapon, more powerful than any on earth.

To make the matter worse in our spiritual warfare, we're not fighting a lone enemy. Satan has an army that's bent on our destruction. Demonic activity is both real and relentless, and we need to be alert according to 1 Peter 5:8.

1 Peter 5:8 Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.

The Corinthians were criticizing Paul as if he were a dog that barked loudly, but only at a distance. They accused him of backing down in any face to face confrontation.

Do you know that, in the majority of cases, when a pastor of the church was pushed out, it was done by 6-7 people out of the entire congregation? They are the ones who stir up the entire church and cause problems.

Paul will defend his apostolic authority. It is important to see how vital Paul's sense of apostolic authority was to him. The idea of apostolic authority is cheapened today by many of those who claim to be "apostles."

The carnal weapons Paul refused were not material weapons like swords and spears. The carnal weapons he renounced were the manipulative and deceitful ways his opponents used. Paul would not defend his apostolic credentials with the carnal weapons others might use.

In Ephesians 6, Paul lists the kind of spiritual weapons he did use – the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the Gospel, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit. To rely on these weapons took faith in God instead of carnal methods. But truly, these weapons are mighty in God for pulling down strongholds.

In my opinion, the v6 is one of the most important key verse in spiritual warfare. I mentioned this before. We need to take captive of every thought to make it obedience to Christ Jesus, before it starts a problem in our minds. If we let our thoughts go wild, there is nothing we wouldn't do carnally. One thing will lead to another, before we realize that we will be in hot water.

B. RISING ABOVE CRITICISM

2 Corinthians 10:7-11 Do you look at things according to the outward appearance? If anyone is convinced in himself that he is Christ's, let him again consider this in himself, that just as he is Christ's, even so we are Christ's. 8 For even if I should boast somewhat more about our authority, which the Lord gave us for edification and not for your destruction, I shall not be ashamed-- 9 lest I seem to terrify you by letters. 10 "For his letters," they say, "are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible." 11 Let such a person consider this, that what we are in word by letters when we are absent, such we will also be in deed when we are present.

Apparently, rumors had been circulating that Paul was hiding behind his pen, saying in letters what he didn't have the nerve to say in person.

On top of this, some people thought he was taking his authority too far. Some of the Corinthians resented Paul's leadership, even though it had been given to him by God.

I have not met anyone who loves to be criticized. That is the reason why many people won't stand in front of a big gathering and speak. They are terrified.

There are a group of people who love to criticize those who are in the position of authority for anything. If they criticize them in love to help them, that is OK. But they are doing this, just because they are jealous. They would do just about anything to bring that person down including personal attack, so that they can be elevated.

V10 is a case in point. This one had to sting. Not only was it a below the belt blow, but it was superficial in importance.

However, they were right in description of Paul.

A second-century Asian priest gives this description of Paul: He was a man small of stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked.

From all accounts, it's doubtful that Paul was a handsome guy. And he apparently wasn't much to write home about when it came to public speaking. Despite his unimpressive appearance, Paul was used by God to perform an incredible ministry.

Last time the Jewish people selected a handsome man as their king, they had a big disaster in their hands:

1 Samuel 16:7 But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have refused him. For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

It seems that Paul is uncomfortable writing about his own authority. This is because he is a humble, godly man. He is using boast here in an exaggerated, almost sarcastic sense to show he would prefer not to talk about his own authority. It feels like "boasting" to him. Paul realizes how much better it would be if the Corinthian Christians would just recognize his authority, so he wouldn't have to boast some what more about it.

Paul recognizes that Jesus grants authority in the church for one reason. It is to build the body of believers up – edification, not to tear it down – destruction.

Paul is writing to his despisers with perfect clarity. "If you want the 'tough' Paul, you will get him. I will come to you with all the authority I have shown in my letters."

A mature person does not use authority to demand respect, but he earns respect. Mature leaders suffer while they wait to act, while immature leaders act without thinking and make others suffer.

The false teachers against Paul depended on "letters of recommendation" for their authority, but Paul had a divine commission from heaven.

This reminds me my own situation. Until some people found out that I don't have a Bible college and seminary degree, they say, "Outstanding sermon, great expositor!" After they found out that I don't have those graduation certificates, they no long want to listen to my teachings. Interesting, isn't it?

C. FACING THE CRITICISM

Success has a spirit-stealing shadow. Its name is Criticism. It makes you want to just throw in the towel, doesn't it? But that won't help. A more effective approach is to figure out how to handle criticism when it comes, because it still come, no matter how

good a job we do. Sometimes it will be constructive and sometimes it will be destructive. But it'll be there and we all need to be ready for it.

Sometimes criticism comes gently from a sincere heart. But other times it is hurled like a fiery dart by a critic who seems to enjoy pinning others to the wall. Sometimes it is based on knowledge or experience. Sometimes it is raised out of ignorance, prejudice, bias, or simply personal preference.

1) Don't forget that no one is immune to criticism.

It is an unavoidable part of living among human beings. If we prepare ourselves for it, we won't feel like the victim of a surprise attack, and we'll be less likely to feel like quitting or fighting back.

2) Remember that criticism can be taken too lightly or too seriously.

Not all criticism is bad, so let's take time to listen to it before we decide on our responses. If we take it too lightly, we might miss out on some valuable instruction. Criticism can help us see our blind spots, and it can teach us things we may not learn otherwise. If we brush it off, we may fail to grow as we should, and we run the risk of remaining unreachable and immature.

On the other hand, taking criticism too seriously can cause a person to lose heart. It can make us give up on a mission we are fully capable of accomplishing. When we take criticism as absolute truth, we often become intimidated and insecure. When that happens, we risk failing at our current endeavor as well as being afraid to tackle the next one.

The best approach is to take criticism to heart – but take it with a grain of salt.

3) Bear in mind that some criticism needs to be answered, but much of it does not.

Some people are so convinced they're right that they tune out every opposing opinion. They surround themselves with people who never question their decisions and glide through life on a sea of arrogant self-assurance. Others fret over every minute disagreement, apologizing profusely at every complaint, scrambling to please everyone at all times. Obviously, there has to be a balance, but where is it? When should we respond to criticism, and when should we leave it alone?

Let's start by analyzing the situation. Is the criticism based on a misunderstanding? If so, do your best to clear it up. Is the critic open to dialogue and an exchange of ideas? Hold a meeting of the minds.

But if the critic is a chronic Oscar the grouch, if conversation would only lead to more argument, if it is virtually impossible to address the person who originated the criticism, let it go. This kind of criticism is not productive, only hurtful. Paying attention to it serves no purpose.

Have you ever noticed how Christ responded to criticism? Sometimes He answered it quickly and directly. But more often, He met His critics with silence – even when they were nailing Him to the cross.

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.

D. RIGHT AND WRONG MEASURES OF MINISTRY

2 Corinthians 10:12-18 For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise. 13 We, however, will not boast beyond measure, but within the limits of the sphere which God appointed us--a sphere which especially includes you. 14 For we are not overextending ourselves (as though our authority did not extend to you), for it was to you that we came with the gospel of Christ; 15 not boasting of things beyond measure, that is, in other men's labors, but having hope, that as your faith is increased, we shall be greatly enlarged by you in our sphere, 16 to preach the gospel in the regions beyond you, and not to boast in another man's sphere of accomplishment. 17 But "he who glories, let him glory in the Lord." 18 For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends.

Whoever Paul's opponents and critics were among the Corinthian Christians, they certainly thought highly of themselves. Paul will not class or compare himself with these carnal, worldly people at all.

They were not comparing themselves against God's standards, but their own. These Judaizers belonged to a "mutual admiration society". It is no wonder why these Judaizers were so full of themselves.

Some people measure ministry only by statistics. Quantity is no guarantee of quality.

E. APPLICATIONS

1) Openly claim our own responsibilities.

Three of the hardest words in the English language are "You are right." The others are "I am wrong!" and "I am sorry." When a critic's words ring true, even just in part, admit it. It will diffuse our anger and help us grow in areas where God may be asking us to change.

2) Humbly stand where we know we're right.

When we've examined ourselves, searched the Scriptures, and prayed concerning a critical comment we have received and we still feel that we are in the right, let's stand firm. Don't let others budge us from what we're sure God has called us to do or to be. Listen to the person's words, but don't feel obligated to confirm them if they aren't true. It's possible to set the criticism aside with humility. As Paul did, "boast in the Lord" – not in ourselves.

3) Calmly allow the Lord to defend us.

When we have reached an impasse and we can't convince our critics, let's rely on the Lord. He knows the truth, and He'll take care of us.