

# Heard some hard words lately?

What to do when your leadership is criticized.

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Have you ever had people complain about your leadership? If no one has been critical of your leadership then you either have not led through difficult times or you just never heard what someone said behind your back. Everyone who leads gets criticized! I don't care where you look in the scriptures, someone finds fault with the leader. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, Nehemiah, Jesus, Peter, Barnabus, Paul, John Mark, Timothy...the list is endless of leaders who were criticized in the midst of their leading.

Many people never realize how much pain they inflict when they criticize a leader. I recently heard of how one letter from an "ordinary Joe" demoralized Bill Gaither at a critical time in his life. I have spent many sleepless nights wrestling with people who have picked apart my motives or my actions. At times they did so to my face and at other times they did it behind my back to someone else.

As I coach leaders it seems that most of us tend toward one of two extremes: some of us are *paralyzed* when others complain about our leadership while others are *galvanized*. I am not sure either extreme is Biblical. Those who are paralyzed by criticism allow others to shut down Kingdom work; while those who are galvanized tend to look for criticism and not learn from it, thereby not growing through other's observations.

In the book of Nehemiah these two influential leaders continue to ridicule and criticize Nehemiah's leadership. Finally in chapter 6 they give a full onslaught to keep Nehemiah from fulfilling God's call (the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem). FIVE TIMES, they try to dissuade him. They then lie to others about what he is doing, trying to stir up trouble for him. Nehemiah's response is classic, he ignores them and refuses to stop the work, and finally he clearly and concisely tells them that they are lying and then he prays that God will strengthen him (6.1-9).

In Luke 11, some people accused Jesus of being on Satan's side; that must have cut deep. Ironically, Jesus calmly and clearly tells them that this is not the case and then gives them a story to illustrate the fallacy of their accusations. Notice in this case at least, he does not attack those who made the statement.

In Acts 6.1ff the Apostles learned from the complaints of the Hellenistic widows and changed their structure. Peter, we assume learned from Paul's criticism in Galatians 2.11. All of the disciples learned from Jesus' criticism of their responses throughout the Gospels to become men and women of faith.

In each of these varied situations, the leaders responded differently to criticism. So how do we know when to *learn* from the criticisms, when to *listen* and then correct others and when to *lean* the other way? How do *you* handle criticism? What is your normal response to someone criticizing you? Let me suggest you resist falling into either extreme of being paralyzed or galvanized.

Jesus always considered the source. He surely looked at the intent as well as the content. From Jesus to all of the other leaders who handled a lot of criticism, one thing is obvious; each was clear

about his or her call, which allowed them to listen to other's concerns without being threatened. This is because they were sure in their sense of calling. If I am confident in my calling, there seems to be a sense of security, which allows me to listen to others complaints without capitulating in my call. I am able to hear what they say and to evaluate their intent and their content. I have always found someone who was not immediately emotionally involved in the situation an invaluable sounding board in this process. I clearly allow this outside person to give me perspective and advice, which I follow.

The problem with this is that often the criticism comes at a time when we are tired, weary or insecure in our call. This is when we are most vulnerable and even more reason that we need to handle criticism in love and not in react. We need to seek someone outside of the immediacy of the criticism, someone who is not a part of the problem.

I wish criticism was not a part of the church, but it has been true since God created the church in the book of Acts. I find it interesting that in every place that God mentions Spiritual Gifts in the New Testament, love is accentuated. In 1 Corinthians 12 & 14 Paul gives an in-depth teaching and analysis of spiritual gifts, and right in between these two chapters he gives the Love description in chapter 13, which is read at most weddings. But Paul wasn't necessarily describing marriage love as he was describing the kind of love needed when gifts are practiced. The same is true of Romans 12, Ephesians 4-5 and 1 Peter 4; love must be practiced and kept central.

God has called us to lead and we will be criticized. We must all speak the truth in love and reciprocate with love when others speak such to us. But we must not capitulate on our call to follow him as we lead God's church to expand his Kingdom throughout the world.