

The Pain of Criticism

1. Warm-up: Think back to American Idol when Simon Cowell, Paula Abdul, and Randy Jackson were the judges. When you offer criticism to others, are you more like Simon, Paula, or Randy? In your view, which judge was best and why?
2. Sunday scripture contains Paul's reflections on a time when tensions flared between him and the Corinthian Church. Paul was the missionary who planted the Corinthian Church, then continued his missionary journeys, staying in touch with the Corinthians via letters. When a messenger told Paul that bad things were happening in the Corinthian Church, he sent them a letter of correction that contained pointed criticism. In our Bibles that letter is known as First Corinthians. Thankfully, the Corinthians responded well to Paul's criticism, owned their stuff, made changes, and were able to continue to grow and thrive as a church family. In our reading, Paul reflects back on all this. Read II Corinthians 7:2-11, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. In our reading, Paul acknowledges the grief his letter of correction caused the Corinthians. Brain scans done by neuroscientist Matthew Lieberman at the University of California Los Angeles document that criticism stimulates the same part of our brain as processes raw physical pain. On Sunday Jeff told us about a time he experienced painful criticism from his boss at a law firm. Tell us about a time you experienced painful criticism. Describe how you felt and what kind of physical pain you would compare it to.
 - b. When someone criticizes us, we can find ourselves replaying that criticism over and over again like a bad song we can't get out of our brain. ("Like a virgin, touched for the very first time." ©) We want to forget, we want to push it away, but we can't. Why is that? Why do we obsess so much over criticism?
 - c. Sometimes criticism is fair, sometimes it's not, and sometimes it's some of both. Some life coaches say that we can learn something even from unfair criticism. Do you buy that? How should we react to criticism that strikes us as unfair?
3. In II Corinthians 7:8, Paul says, "Even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it (though I did regret it, for I see that I grieved you with that letter, though only briefly.) [But] now I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because your grief led to repentance." Paul rejoiced because even though his criticism was hard to hear, somehow the Corinthians were able to take it in, reflect on it, own their stuff, make changes (repentance), and grow from that experience. All of which challenges us to ask ourselves: Can I – like the Corinthians – hear criticism?
 - a. If you were to rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 meaning "I absolutely cannot hear criticism" and 10 meaning "I'm a master at receiving criticism," what number would you assign yourself? Explain your choice.

- b. Sally Smith, former CEO of the Buffalo Wild Wings restaurant chain always asked her subordinates to submit their evaluations of her to her Board of Directors. In addition, she routinely would ask subordinates to give her four things she needed to work on in the next year. Have you ever known someone who was great at wanting and receiving critical feedback? Tell us about them.
 - c. As a practical matter, how can we grow our capacity to receive critical feedback?
4. Discuss what each of the following verses mean:
- Psalm 141:5. "Let the righteous strike me; let the faithful correct me."
- Proverbs 27:6. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful."
- Proverbs 13:18. "The one who heeds reproof is honored."
- Colossians 3:16. "Admonish one another."
5. Because constructive criticism is so valuable, Paul said to the Corinthians, "If I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it. . . ." II Corinthians 7:8. It clearly grieved Paul to grieve the Corinthians, but he knew the pain would be worth the gain. That raises another question for each of us: If criticism is that valuable, am I willing to offer it to others?
- a. Jeff said he really struggles to give frank feedback to people because he hates to see people hurt and is so conflict adverse. How about you? Do you find it hard or easy to offer critical feedback? If you find it hard, why? If you find it easy, why?
 - b. Tone is everything when offering criticism that's constructive. Colossians 4:6 says, "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt." Tell us about a time you saw someone offer difficult criticism in a very loving, gracious way.
6. Paul says, "I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because your grief led to repentance; for you felt a godly grief, so that you were not harmed in any way by us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death." II Corinthians 7:9-10.
- a. According to Paul, we can respond to the grief of criticism in a "godly" way or a "worldly" way. Godly grief, Paul says, relieves regret. Jeff attempted to sum this up in two equations. Failure + True Introspection (godly grief) = Progress. Failure + Discouragement (Worldly Grief) = Stuckness. What is it about a godly response to failure and criticism that tends to ease our regret over our failures?
 - b. The story of John Mark in the Bible is a beautiful example of how the ability to hear criticism and learn from our failure positions us for amazing growth. Tell us something important you learned from a grave failure in your life.

***Let's go out of here and be the kind of people who
are courageous enough to welcome critical feedback!***

II Corinthians 7:2-11

2 Make room in your hearts for us; we have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. ³I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. ⁴I often boast about you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with consolation; I am overjoyed in all our affliction.

5 For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted in every way—disputes without and fears within. ⁶But God, who consoles the downcast, consoled us by the arrival of Titus, ⁷and not only by his coming, but also by the consolation with which he was consoled about you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more. ⁸For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it (though I did regret it, for I see that I grieved you with that letter, though only briefly). ⁹Now I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because your grief led to repentance; for you felt a godly grief, so that you were not harmed in any way by us. ¹⁰For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death. ¹¹For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves guiltless in the matter.