

I invite you to open your bibles to today's scripture text which can be found in the book of proverbs; chapter 9, verse 9 : chapter 12, verse 15 : chapter 13, verse 10 : chapter 15, verse 32 : chapter 17, verse 10. We continue in our series "the peacemakers". Today's scripture encourages believers to overcome their natural tendency to resist correction, and instead to learn to welcome criticism as a blessing from God and a means of personal growth.

*Our Fathers Word*

**Pr 9:9** Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still;  
teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning.

**Pr 12:15** The way of a fool seems right to him,  
but a wise man listens to advice.

**Pr 13:10** Pride only breeds quarrels,  
but wisdom is found in those who take advice.

**Pr 15:32** He who ignores discipline despises himself,  
but whoever heeds correction gains understanding.

**Pr 17:10** A rebuke impresses a man of discernment  
more than a hundred lashes a fool.

This is the word of God, for the people of God.

Pride can be exceedingly costly. Critical words can cut to the core. Undoubtedly, you know that from experience. At times they hurt so much that we turn away and refuse to listen. Sadly, the refusal to hear such words can lead to real and great tragedy.

When I was a freshman at college, I recall one of the greatest tragedies of my youth. A tragedy that cut to the core of our hearts and confidence at MTU so deeply, that the university cancelled classes for only the 2 time in its 100 year history of growing the nations future engineers. On January 28, 1986, the space shuttle Challenger and its crew embarked on a mission to broaden educational horizons and promote the advancement of scientific knowledge. The most outstanding objective of the Challenger 5 mission was for crew member and teacher Christa McAuliffe to present educational lessons from space. The mission did present a lesson, but not the ones that we expected.

Just seventy-five seconds after liftoff, tragedy struck. Before a watching world the shuttle suddenly exploded overhead—disintegrating the cabin along with its crew. The debris of metal, blood, and bones plummeted to earth, and along with it, our nation's glory. I can still recall the crowds of people standing around in the dorms in front of the t.v. silent, shocked, and filled with sorrow.

What had gone wrong? That was the pressing question everyone asked. As teams of researchers examined the wreckage, the specific cause was soon discovered. The problem was with the O-rings (circular rubber seals), which had been designed to fit snugly into the joints of the booster engine sections.

Evidently, the O-rings had become defective under adverse conditions, and the resulting mechanical failure led to the tragedy. That was the whole story. Or so many thought. But then the truth came out.

The New York Times put it frankly: the ultimate cause of the space shuttle disaster was pride. A group of top level managers failed to listen carefully to the warnings, advice, and criticism given by those beneath them in the chain of command. Those in lower management were concerned about the operational reliability of certain parts of the booster engine when under conditions of abnormal stress. They expressed specific concerns about the reliability of the O-rings in unusually cold temperatures, but the upper management did not listen. Just think: heeding this criticism could have saved seven human lives.

The tragedy of the Challenger presents a challenge relevant to all of us: Do we know how to take criticism? How should we respond to words that “cut to the core”? Criticism is constantly zigzagging its way in and out of our lives. In fact, the way we take criticism plays a major role in the way we respond to the conflicted situations we deal with daily: Will we respond with a spirit of defensiveness and pride, heightening the conflict? Or will we respond with wisdom, graciousness, and humility, and thereby reduce the level of hostility?

The answer to these questions has already been given. God has given us his gift of the Cross. Through understanding and embracing the gospel of Jesus Christ’s death on the Cross, we have the very key to responding to criticism in a way that pleases God.

“Criticism” is when another person judges you by declaring that you have *fallen short* of a particular *standard*. The standard may be God's or man's. The judgment may be true or false. The criticism may be given gently to correct, or harshly to condemn. It may come from a friend or an enemy. Whatever the case, it is a judgment or criticism about you—that you have failed and fallen short of someone’s standard.

However criticism comes, most of us would agree that it is simply difficult to take. Criticism stings! And who of us doesn’t know someone with whom we need to be especially careful, lest even our most subtle suggestions for improvement spark his anger? How many times have you been warned to "walk on eggshells" around that person?

Unfortunately, the case is too often true that “that person” is someone in a position of authority or leadership—such as a parent, a husband, a church leader, or an employer. Those under his authority would not dare confront or criticize him for fear that he might lash out in anger or even retaliate. How many women hesitate to criticize their husband, for fear that he might bristle or walk off without listening? How many church members have chosen not to confront their pastor for fear that he will condemn their remarks as accusatory and unloving? The consequences in these types of situations range from estranged marriages to people walking out on their churches or ministries.

What is even worse is that many people in positions of authority either surround themselves with “yes” people—who never say “no” or question their decisions—or “condition” those who live and work with them to be agreeable...or else...!!!

How many children are taught that you never question Mom or Dad, not even with a respectful appeal? How many employees fear they're limiting their chances for promotion if they suggest a "different way" of doing something?

As sad as that is, I admit that such people differ little from me. I, too, do not like criticism and find it very hard to take. I'd much rather be commended than corrected, praised than rebuked. I'd much rather judge than be judged! And I am not alone in this. The more I listen, the more I hear people pulling out their swords to put up a defense when confronted with criticism.

Perhaps you've seen it in the humorous way a couple is sidetracked from the issue at hand into endless bickering about who said what, when, and where. Or what about the mother and daughter who go back and forth correcting one another about whether it was a Tuesday or Wednesday when something happened?

Why do we spend so much time and energy swatting at these flies with hammers? When someone points out our most minor shortcomings, why does it provoke us to full-scale attack? Why do our hearts and minds so instantly engage, and our emotions surge with energy, running to our defense?

The answer is simple. These issues are not minor or insignificant to us. We defend what we believe to be of great value. We believe something much larger will be lost if we do not use every means to rescue it—specifically, our name, our reputation, our honor, and our glory. Indeed, we think it is our life that we are saving.

In effect, we say to ourselves, “If I don't point out that I've been misunderstood, misquoted, and falsely accused, then others won't know that I'm right. And if I don't point out my rightness, nobody will. I will be scorned and condemned in the eyes of others, and I can't live with that.”

Do you recognize the idol of self here—the deep-rooted desire to place ourselves, our reputation, and our honor above all else? Do you see the controlling desire for self-justification—to be proven right (or righteous) in the eyes of others? Unfortunately, our idols have consequences. This deep desire to justify ourselves results in the tragedy of the space shuttle getting played out over and over again in our lives. It destroys our relationships. It leads to death. For the sake of our pride and foolishness, we willingly suffer the loss of friends, a spouse, or loved ones.

Some of this destruction comes veiled as a truce. We call for a cold war; we make a false peace. We pledge to each other to discuss only those things that have little significance for bettering our souls. We speak at the most superficial level. In the meantime, we bury land mines to threaten the other, letting him know that we will explode if he so much as peeps a word about my mistake, my sin, or my need to be corrected.

In short, our idolatrous desire to justify ourselves fuels our inability to take criticism, which, in turn, is the cause for much conflict. It is the reason that many marriages and families split, factions form, and relationships grow cold. And it is the reason we so desperately need the direction provided in Scripture to begin forming a redemptive, Godward view of criticism.

Scripture, particularly the book of Proverbs, teaches how important it is to be able to hear correction and take criticism. According to the following verses, being teachable and willing to receive correction is a mark of a mature person:

- “The way of a fool seems right to him, but *a wise man listens to advice*” (Prov. 12:15).
- “Pride only breeds quarrels, but *wisdom is found in those who take advice*” (Prov. 13:10).
- “*A rebuke impresses a man of discernment more than a hundred lashes a fool*” (Prov. 17:10).

Wise fathers and mothers also will encourage and model this spirit of humility and wisdom to their children.

The ability to take advice, correction, and rebuke is not only considered a mark of the wise, but it is also thought to determine the path of the wise. In fact, Scripture tells us that both the wise and the foolish reap consequences according to their ability to take criticism:

- “He who scorns instruction will *pay for it*, but he who respects a command is *rewarded*” (Prov. 13:13).
- “Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will *add to his learning*” (Prov. 9:9).
- “He who ignores discipline *despises himself*, but whoever heeds correction *gains understanding*” (Prov. 15:32).

The wise recognize that there is gain in taking criticism. No wonder David exclaims in Psalm 141:5, “Let a righteous man strike me—it is a *kindness*; let him rebuke me—it is *oil on my head*. My head *will not refuse it*”.

David knows the benefit of gaining wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. He realizes that criticism from a godly person is always a kindness and an honor, although it may sting. And even when criticism is largely inaccurate or given with unkind motives, it can still be a blessing and help us to grow if we have the humility to listen to whatever may be true in it.

Is that how you look at a rebuke? Is this how you hear criticism, correction, or counsel? If not, do you *want* to change the way you respond to criticism? That is a key question. We must want it. Then the next step is to move from being quick to defend ourselves against any and all criticism, toward becoming like David, who welcomed it as a kindness. How can we do this?

The answer lies in understanding, believing, and affirming all that God says about us in the Cross of Christ. We need to embrace the apostle Paul's claim that we "have been crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20) by condemning all that God condemns and affirming all that God affirms in Christ's crucifixion. In other words, we will never be able to welcome criticism as a kindness until we understand both God's criticism and his justification of us through Christ's Cross.

The first step in understanding and applying the Cross is to be able to say, "In Christ's Cross, I affirm God's judgment of me." As we've seen, criticism is another word for "judgment." One reason we find it hard to hear criticism from others is because we have not heard God's criticism of us on the Cross. We forget that on the Cross God "criticized" us—that is, God judged us *in Christ*. That is why Paul the apostle declares, "I have been crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20).



Have you ever claimed, “I have been crucified with Christ,” and believed it for yourself? Part of what this entails is recognizing and agreeing with God’s judgment of each of us—admitting that I have *sinned against him*. There is no escaping the truth, as God’s Word says: “*There is no one righteous, not even one*” (Rom. 3:9-18). As a result of my sin, the Cross has criticized and judged me more intensely, deeply, pervasively, and truly than any person ever could. In other words, no one else’s criticism of me could match the thoroughness of God’s criticism of me.

Knowing this, we can respond to all other criticism by saying, “That’s just a fraction of it!”

Doesn’t Scripture teach us this? Consider two Scripture passages:

- “*Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law*” (Gal. 3:10).
- “*For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it*” (James 2:10).

In other words, we can fully agree with any criticism made of us because Scripture has already condemned us for failing to keep the entire law, and for breaking the whole law. In light of these massive charges against us, any accusations launched at us by humans are mere understatement about who we are and what we’ve done!

Furthermore, we cannot defend ourselves as lawbreakers by trying to offset our sin with our good works. Look at James 2:10 and consider this fact: “*Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.*” Good works cannot make up for our failure!

Once again we see that the Cross does not merely criticize or judge us as sinners; it condemns us for not doing *everything* written in God's law.

Do you believe that? Do you feel the force of that criticism? Do you appreciate the thoroughness of God's judgment?

Finally, in light of the Cross, I must accept that my sin and my inability to keep the law deserve the ultimate judgment—death. Paul states unequivocally in Romans 6:23, “The wages of sin is death.” As believers in Christ, we agree with this truth when we say along with Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live” (Gal. 2:20), and “Our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with” (Rom. 6:6). In other words, our sin deserves death, and in the Cross, our sin has been put to death.

Do you feel the force of that criticism? Do you appreciate the thoroughness of God's judgment?

To claim to be a Christian is to claim to be a person who has understood **criticism**. The Christian is someone who has stood under the greatest criticism—God's criticism—and **agreed** with it! As people who have been “crucified with Christ,” we acknowledge, agree, and approve of God's judgments against us. We confess, “I am a sinner and a lawbreaker! I deserve death!” Do you see how radical a confession that is?

But thanks be to God -- we can say more: We can proclaim and rejoice in the glorious reality of our justification in Christ.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> step in understanding and applying the Cross, we must be able to claim, “In the Cross of Christ, I affirm God's justification of me.” To respond to criticism wisely, I must not only agree with God's judgment of me in the Cross of Christ, but I must also agree with God's justification of me, a sinful sinner. On the basis of Christ's sacrificial death on the Cross, God justifies ungodly people.

Let's think about this for a moment. First, notice that God *justifies* ungodly people. In other words, Christ has paid the penalty of our sin and God has reckoned Christ's righteousness as our own (Phil. 3:9) by faith in him. So we are justified—or declared “righteous”—in God's sight. What a glorious truth!

Second, notice that God justifies *ungodly people* (Rom. 4:5; 3:20-26). In other words, he justifies those who acknowledge their sin and trust *only* in God for their salvation—not in their own effort or good works.

This is what makes us boast not in ourselves, but in Christ. When I hear criticism with unbelieving ears, I defend myself by boasting about my works and my performance. But now we can see that this not a biblical response. Faith in Christ hears and answers criticism by saying, “The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). I no longer try to protect myself and boast about my righteousness. Now I boast in Christ's righteousness, which I have received by faith, not by anything I have done.

Solomon writes that pride breeds quarrels. Quarrels are often over who is right; they are the result of our idolatrous demand to justify ourselves. But they can be silenced in the Cross. For it is there that *God* justifies me—that *he* declares me righteous—by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. And it is there that I am reminded that the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me.

Because of this, God has thoroughly accepted me in Christ. With this sure foundation, I will not need to justify myself!

If you truly take this to heart, the whole world can stand against you, denounce you, or criticize you, and you can reply, “If **God** has justified me, who can **condemn** me? If God declares me righteous, accepts me, and will never forsake me, then why should I feel insecure and fear criticism? Christ bore my sins, and I received his righteousness. Christ takes my condemnation, and I receive God’s great approval—‘JUSTIFIED!’”

And you can begin to live out the implications of these great truths in your life.

*(Implications for Our Response to Criticism)*

In light of God's judgment and his justification of sinners in the Cross of Christ, we can develop positive and effective ways to deal with any and all criticism.

*First, we can face any criticism with **confidence**.* No criticism from another can be greater than the Cross’s criticism of me—a criticism with which I’ve already agreed. I can receive criticism with this attitude: “You do not know a fraction of my shortcomings. Christ has said more about my sin, my failings, my rebellion, and my foolishness than anyone could say about me.”

*Second, we can find **comfort** by seeing God’s hand in the criticism.* We can remember that all the corrections and advice we receive from others (even those that are unfair and mean-spirited) are sent from our heavenly Father—through his good, wise, and perfect providence—to test and purify us. David knows this when Shimei cruelly curses him (see 2 Sam. 16:5-7). David’s men want to kill Shimei, but David commands, “Leave him alone; let him curse, for the LORD has told him to.”

It may be that the LORD will see my distress and repay me with good for the cursing I am receiving today” (2 Sam. 16.11-12). David sees that those who criticize him are ultimately sent by God. Instead of defending himself or attacking his accusers, he submits himself to the Lord.

*Third, we can respond to criticism with a spirit of **thanksgiving**.* Rather than perceiving the most devastating criticism as a strike against who we are and everything we stand for, we can begin to see it as a sweet mercy. Like David we will be able to declare, “Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness” (Ps. 141:5). As we consider the accusation brought against us, we will be able to think, “I am thankful for this correction. It is a blessing to me. For even if it is wrong or misplaced, it reminds me of the faults I do have, and the sins for which my Lord and Savior paid dearly when he died on the Cross for me.”

*Fourth, we can respond with **humility** and a **willingness** to learn from criticism.* If we truly believe that criticism is a mercy and a kindness, we will be willing to hear it constructively—with the patience to discern and distinguish what is truly valid. Knowing both God’s judgment and justification of us in the Cross, we will not be surprised or defensive when we are told about our blind spots or hidden faults. God has judged all our sins; Christ has covered all our sins. So we can listen to those criticizing us and say, “I want to learn how your criticisms are valid. Help me to understand them.”

*Fifth, we can respond to criticism with a spirit of **surrender**.* No longer do we have to battle the condemnation of criticism, because God has justified us. As the apostle Paul declares, “Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns?” (Rom. 8:33-34).

So we can accept criticism graciously, rather than reacting with bitterness, defensiveness, or blame-shifting—responses that typically lead to the breakdown of relationships.

*Finally, when we hear criticism, we can respond in a spirit of **submission**, recognizing that it is God’s means of sanctifying us and weeding out the pride in our hearts. But he doesn’t stop there—his purposes are much greater. He is seeking to *replace* our pride with understanding, goodness, and truth. He is teaching us to discern how to respond *wisely* to criticism—however just or unjust it may be. For example, someone who has heard harsh and unfair criticism knows how hurtful these words can be. One way he can respond wisely is by learning how to *give* criticism graciously and constructively.*

Responding to criticism with these attitudes can produce multiple benefits. These responses give us a sense of peace and confidence. They help us not to create additional problems. These gospel-permeated responses can also minimize the anger and frustration of those who are launching the criticism. When they see that you do not desire to minimize your wrongs and shift the blame—but are taking their counsel seriously—they tend to qualify their criticism. Instead of charging, “You never...,” they may suggest, “Sometimes you....” Rather than diving further into conflict, they may give you a little grace.

The implications of taking criticism in light of the Cross are far-reaching. We do not have to fear man's criticism, for we have already agreed with God's criticism. And we do not have to seek man's approval, for we have something much better—God’s approval.

His love for us helps us to hear correction and criticism as kindness from our Father, who loves each of us and says, “My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he *loves*, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son” (Heb. 12:5-6).

Perhaps you are convicted about the way you react to criticism, and you desire to grow in this area. Perhaps you understand both the criticism of the Cross and the justification of the Cross, and how each shapes your response to criticism. But there may still be a disconnect: “How,” you ask, “do I ‘plug in’ my desire to change and my understanding of the Cross in order to feel the current of true change flowing through my life?” In other words, you want help applying what you’ve learned in order to see real results in your life. Consider these practical steps to begin that process:

*Critique yourself.*

- How do I typically react to correction? Do I pout? Do I try to play down my error and shift the blame? Do I seek to defend myself, boasting about my “good deeds” in order to prove that I am better than another? Or do I go on the attack and point out the other person’s sin or error? Do I resent or harbor anger against the person who criticizes me?
- And how well do I take advice? How often do I seek it? Are people able to approach me to correct me? Can my spouse, parents, children, siblings, or friends correct me? Am I a teachable person?
- *Ask the Lord to give you the desire to be wise instead of foolish.* Use principles in Proverbs to remind yourself how good it is to be willing to receive criticism,

advice, rebuke, counsel, or correction. Learn and meditate on today's scripture text, and on Psalm 141:5 (Proverbs 9:9; 12:15; 13:10, 13; 15:32; 17:10).

*Focus on your crucifixion with Christ.* While you might say, "I have been crucified with Christ," you may not walk daily in the light of the Cross. Give thanks to God for his justification of you. Then challenge yourself with these two questions: (1) If I continually kick under the criticism of people, how can I say I know and agree with the criticism of the Cross? (2) If I typically try to justify myself, how can I say I know, appreciate, and cling to God's justification of me through Christ?

This process will drive you back to the Cross to reflect on God's judgment and justification of you, a sinner. As you meditate on what God has done for you, you will find your faith directed to Christ. And it is by faith that you will again affirm all that God says about you in Christ, with whom you have been crucified.

*Learn to speak nourishing words to others.* I want to *receive* criticism as a sinner living within Jesus' mercy. So how can I *give* criticism in a way that expresses mercy to another? (Prov. 15:1) "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger". Accurate, balanced criticism, given mercifully, is the easiest to hear. And if I recognize that I naturally rebel against even accurate criticism, I will be motivated to be loving when I speak the truth to others. I will work to be kind to everyone, not resentful, teaching gently (see 2 Tim. 2:24-26). And I will ask myself, "How can I best give accurate, fair, and balanced criticism with much mercy and affirmation?"

Challenge: Ask yourself, "Do people feel comfortable offering me correction, or do I have a habit of responding with defensiveness and self-justification?" If you aren't sure of the answer, ask someone who cares about you.



Heavenly Father,

Thank you for the Love of Christ on the Cross for being our redeemer

Grant that we will gain a victory over our pride,

And learn to receive criticism without becoming defensive,

Help us to experience a new freedom in life

that overflows in praise to our Lord Jesus Christ

who has rescued us from all judgment and condemnation.

Afford us your Comfort Lord, in the realization that

Your hand is in criticism we receive sent to purify us.

Help us to respond with humility, and a willingness to learn from that criticism

and with a spirit of surrender.

Lord, so that you may be glorified in everything that we do,

Give us the desire to be wise instead of foolish.

May you have the Praise, the honor, and the Glory.

Amen