

**HE COPEd WITH CRITICISM**  
**The Final Week: Seven Days of Stress – Part 3**  
***Mark 11:27-30***

A guest in a seaside hotel restaurant called over the head waiter one morning and said, “I want two boiled eggs—one of them so undercooked it’s runny and the other so overcooked that it’s about as easy to eat as rubber. Also, grilled bacon that has been left on the plate to get cold, burnt toast that crumbles away as soon as you touch it with a knife, butter straight from the deep freeze so that it is impossible to spread, and a pot of very weak coffee, lukewarm.”

“That’s a complicated order, sir,” said the bewildered waiter. “It might be a bit difficult.”

The guest replied, “Really? But that’s exactly what you gave me yesterday!”

An outspoken church member walked by the new preacher on Sunday morning and said, “Preacher, that’s absolutely the worst sermon I have ever heard in my life!” The new preacher, of course, was greatly disturbed. But an elder put a reassuring arm around his shoulder and said, “Preacher, don’t you worry about that guy. He really isn’t right upstairs. He just goes around repeating what he hears other people saying all the time.”

Every leader is subject to criticism. President Obama was called a “wimp” by a reporter prior to his first term election, and then toward the end of his second term he was called a “war Monger” by a group of anti-war demonstrators.

You see, once you step into the spotlight and accept a position of responsibility there will be criticism. If you are a school principal, teacher, coach, or player; if you are a business executive, employee, salesman, or purchasing agent; if you are a parent, or a grandparent, you are going to experience some criticism. No matter how well you perform, no matter how honest you try to be, there will still be complaints.

And criticism creates stress. Nobody likes to be second-guessed and it is easy to become defensive and irritable. Our ability to handle criticism reveals a great deal about our character, and it goes a long way toward determining our success.

It’s kind of reassuring to look at the Bible and see that Jesus Christ was subject to criticism. He was perfect, yet he was hounded all the time by the naysayers. That put additional pressure on him, especially during this final week of his life.

**So let’s look at what the negative people were saying and how Jesus reacted to it. I think we will find several relevant lessons about how we can cope with criticism in our lives.**

**I. A LOOK AT JESUS’ CRITICS.**

**Who were some of Jesus’ *critics*?**

The Bible says in Mark 11:27, *“...the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. ‘By what authority are you doing these things?’ they asked.”*

Jesus had just cleansed the temple and the elders were saying, “Who gave you the right to take charge in here?” Now this was certainly not the first time that Jesus was subject to criticism. His life had been under review from the skeptics from the very beginning of his ministry. Remember how the people of his hometown criticized him? “Who does he think he is, pretending to be somebody special? We know who he is. He grew up right here in Nazareth. Why, his mother and family are still right here with us. It’s no big deal!” The criticism got so intense that they tried to throw Jesus off a cliff and kill him.

Even members of his own family were critical of him. Mark 3:21 reads, *“When his family heard about this (some people claiming he was the Messiah), they went to take charge of him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind.’”*

Even Jesus’ own disciples second guessed him on occasion. They would say, “Jesus, you’re spending too much time with the children.” “Lord, your teaching about divorce was too rigid.” “Your teaching about riches was too demanding. Nobody is going to be saved!” “We don’t think you ought to go back to Jerusalem at this time.”

Mary and Martha, two of his closest friends, criticized him. When their brother died, they met Jesus, saying, “If you had come when we called you he wouldn’t have died.” “No, don’t go out to the tomb now. Don’t open the tomb now. It’s too late. You have waited too long!”

**But the *religious leaders* of that day were his biggest critics.**

They were on Jesus’ back constantly. “Why do you heal on the Sabbath?” “Why don’t your disciples fast?” “Why are you eating with sinners?” “You’re casting out demons by the devil’s power!” They were so jealous of Jesus. They were scrutinizing his ministry all the time, just hoping that he would make some public mistake so that he would lose credibility with the people. It had to put incredible pressure on Jesus to see these enemies lurking on the fringe of the crowd scowling, taking notes, mumbling with each other, sneering, looking for some crack in his armor. And now they say, “Who gives you the authority to cleanse this temple?”

**Now there are three *factors* that determine how much pressure criticism puts on us.**

**The first is the *person* doing the criticism.**

If the critic has little authority or respect, the complaint won’t cut too deeply. We just say, “Well, consider the source.” But if the person criticizing is powerful and popular, then it hurts. Jesus’ critics were the influential religious leaders of his day.

**The second factor is the *timing* of the criticism.**

If you are successful and rested, and you are relaxed, it is much easier to keep criticism in perspective. But if you've just suffered a defeat, or if you are tired, or if you are hearing the same complaint ten times in a row, then criticism really tests your composure. Jesus was criticized at a time when his life was already under extreme pressure. Some of his followers were about to defect, he had just exhausted his energy in cleansing the temple, and he knew that he had just a few days to live. So this challenge to his authority couldn't have come at a more stressful time.

**The third factor that determines the severity of criticism is the *nature* of the complaint.**

If I'm criticized in an area of strength, or an area where I know I am innocent, then the criticism doesn't bother me very much. But if I'm challenged in an area of weakness, or guilt, then I bristle up and get defensive and criticism hurts more.

Somebody might say, "David, I think you are preaching for money." And that would just roll off me because I know that that's not true. It wouldn't bother me. But somebody could say, "I think you are uncaring." And that would hurt, because I feel guilty about not being able to pastor to an entire congregation the way I would like to.

Somebody might say, "I met you three times, David, and I saw you out in a restaurant. And not only did you not remember my name, but you didn't even recognize me." And that would hurt because there is some truth in that sometimes.

I haven't gone so far as one preacher at a large Christian Church in Los Angeles, however. He met a fellow at a restaurant and said, "Hey, haven't I met you?" And the guy said, "Yeah, you baptized me at the end of the service this morning!"

But Jesus had no weaknesses. He had nothing about which he felt guilty. And yet, the single biggest question among the people at that time was the identity of Jesus. Was he the Messiah, or was he not? And Jesus knew that it was time for those people to make individual choices.

**But these religious leaders were challenging him openly on this critical matter: "*Who are you? Who gives you the authority to do this?*"**

And if Jesus said, "I get my authority from God," they could have arrested him for blasphemy on the spot. But if he refused to answer altogether, he would have lost credibility with the people, some of whom were already proclaiming him to be the Messiah. These critics put so much pressure on Jesus, I'm impressed that he didn't call down fire from heaven to consume them.

But notice how Jesus responded to the critics. Verse 29: "*Jesus replied, "I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism—was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me!"*" (Mark 11:29-30).

**Rather than directly answer their question, he *deflected* their question right back in their laps.**

“I’ll answer your question; you answer mine. John the Baptist, when he was out in the wilderness telling people to be immersed in water as a demonstration of repentance, who gave him the right to do that? He didn’t graduate from one of your seminaries, he wasn’t an official Rabbi.”

Now the critics were really on the spot. If they said John didn’t have authority to baptize, they would really lose credibility with the people because everybody held that John the Baptist was a prophet from God. But if they admitted that John was from God, then Jesus would say, “Why didn’t you listen to John when he testified about me and said I was the Messiah?”

Boy, he put them on the spot. But petty critics are not above lying to protect themselves, so they finally answered, “*We don’t know*” (Mark 11:33). And instead of Jesus looking foolish, the religious leaders came out with egg on their face. And “*Jesus said, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things’*” (v. 33).

**Now I want you to notice that Jesus did not answer the critics the *same way* every time.**

**Sometimes he *refused* to answer altogether.** Just like when he was before Herod, and he kept silent.

**Sometimes, like this incident, he answered *indirectly*,** saying, “I get my authority the same place John the Baptist got his.”

**But there were a number of times that Jesus *confronted* the critics *directly* and silenced them.**

They would ask, “Why do your disciples eat grain on the Sabbath Day?” And he would say, “Hey, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

“Why do you eat with sinners?” “Well, it’s because the sick people are the ones who need a physician, not the well.”

“Why don’t your disciples fast?” “Well, when the bridegroom is here it’s a time for celebration.”

“You are casting out demons by the devil’s power.” “Oh no, the devil wouldn’t cast out himself. A house divided against itself can’t stand.”

It seems to me that Jesus answered his critics when he knew his answer would benefit his mission to seek and save the lost. He ignored his critics when there would be no long-term benefit to responding. It takes godly wisdom to know the difference, and it takes a lot of self-control to practice restraint.

## II. FOUR PRACTICAL LESSONS WE CAN LEARN FROM JESUS REGARDING CRITICISM.

Now there are four *practical lessons* I think we can learn from Jesus regarding criticism.

The first is: *Expect criticism occasionally.*

Somebody said, "If you carry the ball, you are going to get tackled."

John 15:20 reads, *"No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also."*

It doesn't matter what you are doing, you are inevitably going to be criticized. Some criticism is normal, don't panic when you hear it.

I'm sure that there are some here this morning who have criticized me on occasion. That's normal. I expect that. I criticize me sometimes too.

A woman approached me in one of my earlier ministries and said, "That lesson today was really immature, and you are childish and need to grow up." And what I wanted to say back to her was, "Liar, liar, pants on fire!"

But people can love each other and criticize each other. Husbands and wives criticize each other I'm told! Children and parents criticize one another, but they still love each other. And if you are out to please everybody all the time and you are devastated by a little bit of criticism, then you are going to live a miserable life.

I heard about a grandfather who was taking his grandson to town. They only had one donkey, so he graciously put the grandson on the donkey and let him ride. And he overheard people along the way criticizing, saying, "Look at that selfish little boy, making the old man walk."

Well, he couldn't take it, people were criticizing his grandson. So he made the grandson walk and he got on the donkey. Then he heard people say, "Look at that selfish old man, making that poor little boy walk."

So he got off and they walked together. And people said, "Look at those stupid people. They've got a donkey and they are not even using it."

So they both got on the donkey and rode and people said, "They are going to break the back of that donkey – that poor donkey."

And the last scene is that of the old man and the grandson carrying the donkey down the road.

No matter what you do, you are not going to please everybody. Max Lucado said, “I don’t know what the secret of success is, but I’ll tell you the key to failure. The key to failure is trying to please everybody.”

Jesus said, *“Beware when all men speak well of you...”* (Luke 6:26). If you seek to grow, to improve, to achieve, there will always be fault finders.

The Lord said, *“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven...”* (Matthew 5:11-12).

*“No servant is greater than his master...”* Jesus said (John 15:20). So expect criticism on occasion.

### **The second lesson is: *Evaluate criticism objectively.***

We are not Jesus Christ. We are not perfect. So when criticism comes our way we ought to evaluate it as objectively as we can and make the necessary adjustments.

Listen to Proverbs 25:12: *“Like an...ornament of fine gold is a wise man’s rebuke to a listening ear.”*

In other words, one of the most loving things that a friend can do is to confront us in an area that needs to be corrected. And one of the wisest things that we can do is to give them a ready ear. Don’t dismiss the criticism lightly as just another heckler. Maybe it’s true!

Pastor Wayne Smith told about the time the elders of his church asked him to go to lunch with them. And a group of them said, “Wayne, you know we love you, but we want to talk with you about your sermons. You have preached a lot of repeat sermons recently and we think they are kind of shallow. And as our church gets larger, we need you to feed us more from the pulpit. You spend so much time calling on people, but we think you need to spend more time in the study.”

Well Wayne was crushed. He would weep when he talked about it. But he didn’t get bitter. He thought it through, he talked about it to a lot of people, and he mentioned it in sermons. And he decided that he was going to study more. His sermons deepened, and as a result God poured out his blessing on that congregation and attendance over the course of the next year doubled. But that shows what a very special person Wayne was and why he was such a beloved preacher in our brotherhood of churches.

Proverbs 13:18 says, *“...whoever heeds correction is honored.”*

### **The third lesson is: *If the criticism is untrue or unfair, ignore it graciously.***

Now that isn’t easy to do. Our first reaction is either to be defensive or apologetic. But the best thing we can do if it is not true is just ignore it and go on.

When Nehemiah was rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem two critics, Sanballat and Tobiah, came and looked at the wall. And the Old Testament says that they giggled and said, *“That stone wall would collapse if even a fox walked along the top of it!”* (Nehemiah 4:3, NLT). But, Nehemiah didn’t answer their criticism, he just kept building. And finally it became apparent that the wall was going to get finished, and Sanballat and Tobiah were really concerned.

So they sent Nehemiah a letter and said, “Would you come down in the valley with us and discuss this building project?” And Nehemiah’s answer to them was classic. He said, *“I am engaged in a great work, so I can’t come”* (Nehemiah 6:3, NLT). And he just kept building.

You see, it was more important that the work get finished than the critics get answered. To respond to criticism gives the critic unwarranted credibility at times. It takes time, energy, and attention away from what ought to be done. So the best course is usually just to ignore the critics and go on.

Plato was once accused falsely. His advisors urged him to respond, but he said, “No, I’m just going to live in such a way to prove those accusations a lie.”

First Peter 2:12 reads, *“Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God....”*

**The fourth lesson is this: When it is appropriate, answer the critics directly.**

Jesus often ignored criticism, but sometimes he responded very truthfully and lovingly. That means there are times when we need to keep silent, and there are times that we need to speak up. Sometimes criticism can be detrimental and needs to be answered.

Certainly this church has occasionally been criticized over the years. Overall, I think our church has a good reputation in the community. But if we grow in the future, as we plan for and pray that we will—as most growing churches experience, we can expect that with that growth will come some criticism. Some of it out of jealousy, some of it out of misunderstanding, maybe some of it will be warranted. But for the most part the criticisms should be ignored.

But sometimes you need information to answer the critics correctly. I don’t want you to be defensive about this church, but I don’t want you to be defenseless either. So let’s talk about it.

**Here are some of the criticisms I have heard, or you have heard, and you are likely to hear some more as we grow.**

**“I don’t think this church should grow anymore. We like it just the way it is. Bigger churches are just too cold anyway.”**

Well, I’m convinced that our concept of the church is taken more from our culture than it is from the Bible. The church in Jerusalem started with 3,000 people. And then a few

chapters later in Acts it says it grew to 5,000 men and they all met together in the temple courts. I doubt if Simon Peter knew all their names, I doubt if he remembered everybody he had baptized the day before.

You see, the church was never meant to be a pyramid with the pastor at the top meeting everybody's needs, the church is a circle where we minister to one another. And when people say, "I'm not going to go to that church because there are too many people there," I have one standard answer: "Don't go to heaven, then, because you are going to be really disappointed." The Bible says there is going to be a number there so great that we cannot even count them.

And we shouldn't make any apologies about the fact that we want this church to grow. As long as there is one person within the radius of this church that does not know Christ, then we want to grow one more.

The early church got excited about numbers. Somebody counted 120 people in the upper room, 3,000 baptized on the day of Pentecost, 5,000 men in the early church. They got excited about numbers because the numbers represented people. And I hope this is a place where we count people because people count to us. They are important to God, and hopefully they are important to us.

**Another criticism that growing churches often hear is that they *steal* members of other churches.**

Although we will never intentionally go out and wrestle anybody away from their church, some people who have belonged to other churches will come here. Maybe some of those have not been active in their church for a long time. Others are unhappy with the liberalism, or the bickering, or the lifelessness in their church. And as I have responded to some on occasion over the years, "We don't steal sheep, but we do plant grass." If people come here to be fed and their needs are being met, we don't turn them away. They are welcome here, just as they would be in any congregation.

And what some people don't understand is that we occasionally lose people to other churches, too. Now I hate to lose anybody, but I have to understand, and you have to understand, this church is not for everybody. People have personalities, just like churches have personalities, and sometimes there is a conflict. If a person is not happy here over a period of time, I would rather they go someplace else where they grow and they are fed as opposed to just being inactive or grumbling all the time. And I will be honest with you, I don't ever remember any preacher ever calling me and saying, "David, some of your people are coming to our church and I'm trying my best to send them back." I wouldn't expect them to. That's not normal.

**Another criticism I hear about the church sometimes is that it is all *entertainment*.**



Some people's view of the church is that we are just a country club where Christians go to have a good time.

Do you know what David said? David said, *"I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'"* (Psalm 122:1, NLT). "I was glad!" Where in this book does it say you are supposed to be miserable and bored when you go to church? David said, "I was glad!" *"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice,"* Philippians 4:4 says. And what we do here, we try to do to the best of our ability. Whether it's decorating a building, conducting a Bible study, hosting a singing group, putting together a community Thanksgiving dinner, we are striving for excellence.

David also said, "Is it right for me to dwell in a house of cedar, when the Lord dwells in a tent?" (see 2 Samuel 7:2). "Is it right for me to go first class for me and to go second rate for God?" Is it right for the world to have the best music and for us to always apologize for what we are doing in church?

You can't read the Old Testament without realizing that when those people worshiped they gave their best—a lamb without blemish, first fruits of the flock, the finest ornaments for decorations in the temple. If we are doing it for Jesus Christ, it ought to be the very best that we possibly can give. That is the way we honor him! The Bible says, *"Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus..."* (Colossians 3:17).

I have heard criticism that the church has become liberal to accommodate people and it has become more fundamental to answer the need for security on the part of other people. We can't answer all the criticisms. Some of them we need to listen to and learn from; most of them we just need to ignore and go on.

Paul Harvey used to say, "You always find the most clubs under the tree with the best apples."

It was said of the early Christians, *"These [people] who have turned the world upside down have come here also..."* (Acts 17:6).

One of the finest compliments a church can have is when the world is threatened by the church. Because our world is upside down right now and it needs to be inverted.

**God wants us to be his kind of church: a place where Jesus Christ is *exalted*, the Holy Spirit is *active*, God is *moving* among people, the lost are *saved*, the saved are *edified*, the hurting are *comforted*, and homes are *solidified*.**

And it is exciting to me to think about and see First Church of Christ becoming more and more that kind of church. So let's just continue to allow his Spirit to flow through us and to give him the glory.