

How to Handle Criticism

Series: Life Together

By David H. Roper

My good friend Bob Barnett tells me the story about the man who was tarred and feathered and run out of town on a rail. As they were carrying him through the streets of the city, he said to one of the men holding the pole, if it weren't for the glory of the whole thing, I'd just as soon pass it up. I think sometimes we feel that way about criticism. If it weren't for the notoriety and acclaim we get out of it, we would just as soon pass it by. I am sure some of our presidential candidates are thinking that way these days. Perhaps you have been the victim this past week of some harsh critical comment and you are still stinging and hurting from it. If so, this passage from 2 Samuel can and does speak to you about that particular issue--how to handle criticism.

This book is the story of David's long and illustrious forty-year reign over the kingdom of Judah. David had his ups and downs, and chapter 16 deals with one of the most depressing periods of David's reign, when he was forced into exile by his son, Absalom.

Absalom is a strange character in the Old Testament. He was David's eldest son and heir apparent to the throne. He was a rakish individual with long, flowing hair and all the trappings of a prince.

He insinuated himself into the hearts of his countrymen by standing in the gate and glad-handing all the men, kissing all the babies, and doing all the time-honored things that politicians do--promising the people tax cuts, equal justice, etc. In a short time, he won the hearts of the people away from David.

As it happened, at this time, when Absalom was making his bid for the throne, David was ill. There were about four years of his life when he was quite sick and, as far as we know, near death. He alludes to that fact in one of his psalms. During this time, Absalom, David's own son, took advantage of this weakness, won the hearts of the people, and dethroned him. The chapters preceding chapter 16 will give you the details of that coup d'etat.

In chapter 15 we are told that David gathered his mighty men around him. These were the men who had been with him before, when he was in exile in the Judean desert and lived with the Philistines. Many of his bodyguards, retainers, and faithful warriors who had accompanied him at that time remained with him during his period of reign. These were old men now, probably in their sixties, and yet still loyal to David.

Chapter 15 records their journey out of the city. It is a very sad, pathetic picture of David and these old warriors making their way through the streets of Jerusalem, out the gate, down through the valley of Kidron, and up the west side of the Mount of Olives. We are told in chapter 16:

Now when David had passed a little beyond the summit, behold, Ziba the servant of Mephibosheth met him with a couple of saddled donkeys, and on them were two hundred loaves of bread, a hundred clusters of raisins, a hundred summer fruits, and a jug of wine. And the king said to Ziba, why do you have these? And Ziba said, "The donkeys are for the king's household to ride, and the bread and summer fruit for the young men to eat, and the wine, for whoever is faint in the wilderness to drink."

Ziba came under the pretext of bringing provisions, but what was really at the back of his mind was a claim that he wished to present for Mephibosheth's inheritance.

Mephibosheth was one of the descendants of Saul, the king who had preceded David. After all of Saul's family had been slain, David inquired about any descendant of Saul, to whom he might show kindness. Mephibosheth was one of these. David invited Mephibosheth to eat at his table--he literally became a son of the king. Although there had been warfare between the house of Saul and the house of David, David showed extraordinary kindness to Mephibosheth. He fed him, provided for him, clothed him, took care of him, and gave him an annual allowance which was his to use as he saw fit. Ziba, who was his servant, accused Mephibosheth of disloyalty to David, saying that he had gone over to the house of Saul and had sided with Absalom and those who were trying to unseat David. David, because he was so accustomed to ingratitude, believed Ziba. By this time, all of his faithful friends had turned against him. Verse 3:

Then the king said, "Where is your master's son?" And Ziba said, "Behold, he is staying in Jerusalem, for he said, 'Today the house of Israel will restore the kingdom of my father to me.'" Now, that was a lie, as we know from reading in this book. Mephibosheth was loyal to

David to the end. But what a disheartening thing this was to David! He had literally poured out his life for Mephibosheth, and now he is told this man has turned on him. Verse 4: So the king said to Ziba, "Behold, all that belongs to Mephibosheth is yours." And Ziba said, "I prostrate myself; let me find favor in your sight, O my lord, the king!" [That is not true, but David believed it at this point.]

Then, in verse 5, we read:

When King David came to Bahurim, behold, there came out from there a man of the family of the house of Saul whose name was Shimel, the son of Gera; he came out cursing continually as he came.

Bahurim is just over the crest of the Mount of Olives, on the east side. David had made his way up the western slope and had paused at the summit. There was a place there, we are told in chapter 15, where people worshiped God. It was the place where pilgrims, coming from Jericho, caught their first glimpse of the city. They would stop there and worship God. It was at this place that David looked back on the city which, as far as he knew, he would never see again. David starts down the other side of the mountain, and, as he is on the down slopes of the Mount of Olives, he arrives at Bahurim, a small town on the road to Jericho.

There he meets this strange old man, Shimei, who comes out continually cursing. We get the picture of this man running out cursing and throwing rocks at David, then running back behind some cover, then coming out again throwing rocks and cursing, then dodging back behind a rock to protect himself. Verses 6 and 7:

And he threw stones at David and at all the servants of King David; and all the people and all the mighty men were at his right and at his left. And thus Shimei said when he cursed, "Get out, get out, you man of bloodshed, and worthless fellow!"

The term "worthless" is akin to our English word "bum" or "derelict" and was used to describe a worthless individual who sponges off society. This is the term Shimei used of the Lord's anointed, David. Shimei continues to curse David in verse 8:

"The Lord has returned upon you all the bloodshed of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and the Lord has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. And behold, you are taken in your own evil, for you are a man of bloodshed!"

We have to realize what a terrible thing this was to do. It was actually against the law to speak evil of the king. The Law of Moses prohibited it because the king was the symbol of God's rule in a nation. In a theocratic nation (i.e., a nation ruled by God) the king sat in the place of God, and if you spoke against the king, you were speaking against God.

That is why, in the so-called imprecatory psalms, in which David addresses or speaks about his enemies, he calls down judgment on their heads. He does so not because he is defending himself, but because he sees that he sits on the throne of Israel, and that is actually the place where God sits. So, any attack upon him is virtually an attack upon God.

To speak evil of the king is to speak evil of God and his program of salvation because it was God's intention to bring salvation to the world through the kings of Judah. That is part of the promise that was given to David at the very beginning. In fact, even farther back, God promised to Abraham that he would bless the world through the nation of Israel and that through the tribe of Judah he would bring the King, Messiah, who would be the source of blessing to the whole world.

So, when Shimei speaks out against the king, he is speaking out against God and his program to bring salvation to the world. He is rejecting God--and that is a serious thing. Here is this worthless old man, Shimei, of whom we know very little, who speaks out of pure tribal jealousy (He is angry because the tribe of Judah is on the throne instead of the tribe of Benjamin), who belittles the king, speaks scornfully of him, throws rocks at him, and does so out of all the wrong motives. He does this at a time when David is at his lowest point.

Shimei, we know, was a despicable little man. Later, as you read on in the book of 2 Samuel, you will discover that when David came back from exile and crossed the ford of the Jordan, Shimei met him there and, in a fawning sort of way, begged for forgiveness, fell on his knees, and promised David undying loyalty. When he saw that his neck was in a noose, he changed his tune. Much later, Solomon had to execute Shimei because of his treachery to him and the threat he was to Solomon's throne. Shimei really was a despicable, shameful man. You can understand, then, Abishai's point of view, given in verse 9:

Then Abishai the son of Zeruiah said to the king, "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over now, and cut off his head."

Abishai was David's nephew, the son of David's sister, Zeruiah. He was one of David's mighty men. He had come to David's side when David was fleeing Saul and had fought alongside him both against the Philistines and with the Philistines. He was a violent man. In fact, he is best known in the Bible for having killed three hundred men (he had three hundred notches on his spear, I suppose). He was a cruel, vicious, violent man, as were his two brothers. These are the ones David refers to in verse 10, when he says,

"What have I to do with you, O sons of Zeruiah?"

The whole family had this violent streak. In this statement, David is separating himself from the viewpoint of these men. It sounds harsh,

translated into English, but it is the same idiom that Jesus uses at the wedding of Cana, when he says to his mother, "What is there between you and me?" It is simply a way of disassociating yourself from the point of view of someone else. You are saying, "I don't buy that approach." It makes a division between the solution that Abishai proposes and the solution that David himself feels most comfortable with. David's response is found in verses 10 through 12:

But the king said, "What have I to do with you, O sons of Zeruah? If he curses, and if the Lord has told him, 'Curse David,' then who shall say, 'Why have you done so?' " Then David said to Abishai and to all his servants, "Behold, my son who came out from me seeks my life; how much more now this Benjamite? Let him alone and let him curse, for the Lord has told him. Perhaps the Lord will look on my sin..."

This should be translated "sin," not "affliction," as the passage reads. It is the Old Testament word "aven," which is always translated "sin." For instance, in the book of Hosea, when Hosea is rebuking the idolatry that was taking place in Bethel (which means "the house of God," by means of a word play he infers, "You are worshiping at Beth-aven", and that is the way it is translated in our English Bibles, "Beth-aven," the house of sin. Hosea is saying to Jeroboam, "You call this God's house; I call this a house of sin, a house of ill repute. You call this God's city; I am calling Sin city." This is the word used in 2 Samuel. It means sin, not misfortune or affliction. David continues in verses 12 through 14:

"...and return good to me instead of his cursing this day." So David and his men went on the way; and Shimei went along on the hillside parallel with him and as he went he cursed, and cast stones, and threw dust at him. And the king and all the people who were with him arrived weary and he refreshed himself there [that is, at Bahurim].

David had been on his way into this little city when Shimei came out, met him along the way, pelted him with rocks, and followed him all the way to the city. David sets up his tent and refreshes himself there. And for all I know, this mean, ornery little man is standing outside David's tent, still throwing rocks, still jumping up and down, still screaming.

Now, that is an interesting story. But what can we learn from this account? Well, there are two or three things that strike me, though I am sure you can find many other things in this passage. The first that strikes me is that criticism inevitably comes when we least need it. Have you noticed that? At the time when you are most in need of affirmation and you want someone to put their arms around you and say "I love you," that is the time when they are most critical of you. It never fails. Certainly that was David's experience. If there were a time when David needed support and encouragement, it was now. He had been dethroned, he had been driven from his city—his city—it was called "the city of David," remember? One after another, some of his most loyal men had forsaken him. He was hurting. Then this little man starts pelting him with rocks and cursing at him. That's the way it goes, invariably.

Some of you women know that on the days when the kids are giving you the gears, it has been a hard day all the way around, and you feel frizzy and frumpy by the end of the day, that's when your husband comes home and says, "You know, hon, I think you're picking up a little weight." That's the last thing you need! What you want is a word of encouragement. Or you men know that when you are having a hard time at the job, that is the day your boss picks to read you the riot act and rake you over the coals for something you've done. The list of illustrations is endless. We have all been there. The very time when we are most in need of affirmation and support is the time we don't get it. Criticism comes when we least need it.

Secondly, criticism almost always comes when you least deserve it—at least, you think so. It comes at a time when you have begun to make amends for some wrong, when you have begun to correct something that you know was wrong and you have been feeling guilty about, and you are working as hard as you can to set things right. Then someone will criticize you for the thing you were doing last week, but which you are correcting now. It never fails!

You see, David didn't deserve this criticism. There were times when David was given to violence and bloodthirstiness. He was a violent man. But he was never bloodguilty with regard to Saul's family. If anything, he had bent over backwards to help them because he had the same view of theocracy that the prophets had. The king was God's representative and David never touched God's representative. He did everything he could to protect Saul—even from his own loyal bodyguard. He showed extraordinary kindness to Mephibosheth. So he was not deserving of this criticism at all.

I think that is why these two accounts of Ziba coming and misrepresenting Mephibosheth and this attack of David with reference to the house of Saul follow one another. Undoubtedly, David, as he rode toward Bahurim, had just been thinking how disloyal Mephibosheth was after he had shown him such loyalty. Then Shimei accuses David of disloyalty to the house of Saul. He didn't deserve the criticism; nevertheless, he received it.

The third thing I note is that criticism always seems to come from people who are the least qualified to give it—people who do not understand us, who have not been where we have been, who haven't struggled where we have struggled. They are thinking theoretically, not in terms of the practical situation. They are throwing rocks from afar, blaming us for things that we are trying our best to correct. They are not qualified. Certainly, of all men, Shimei was not qualified to correct David the anointed.

The fourth thing that I've observed is that criticism frequently comes in a way that is least helpful. I suppose it might have been easier for

David to respond to this criticism if Shimei had gone into David's tent that evening, put his arm around him, and said, "David, there are some things I think I need to tell you about your treatment of the house of Saul. I am sure you weren't aware of what you were doing, but I should perhaps bring you up to date on some of the atrocities that have been committed." But it certainly is hard to respond to rocks and sticks and stones and cursing and violence. The old adage "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." is not true. Words do hurt. They hurt far more than sticks and stones. I am sure that the things that dug into David were not the stones, but the words--harsh, unloving, carping words. That kind of criticism is what hurts. It would be nice if all criticism were constructive and done in a gracious way, but generally it is not.

I want you to notice David's response to Shimei. He does not rebuke him, he does not defend himself. He will neither defend himself, nor will he allow anyone else to defend him. He takes all the abuse that Shimei can give him. I believe he does so for two reasons.

First, David clearly saw the hand of God in this event. Remember what he said? "If he curses, God has told him to." Isn't that amazing? Can you say that about the person who is on your back--the employer who chewed you out this past week, the husband who had some harsh word of criticism, the high school or college age person whose parents got all over him this past week for something he did? Can you see the hand of God in that? David does. He sees that God is speaking through this man. He clearly sees that God is in everything, even the great tragedies in life. That is the message of both the Old and New Testaments:

God is in everything.

The truly mature person can see that. He sees God's hand in even the great calamities of life. Isaiah goes so far as to say that God creates calamities. He is the ultimate cause behind everything that happens to us. We know from the book of Job that Satan is at work, too. Certainly, in the case of Job, the destruction of his family and home and livelihood came from Satan; but when Satan reported to God, God said, "Satan, you moved me against my servant Job." God takes the ultimate responsibility.

How often I have said, when I have been criticized, "Well, I just have to consider the source." I don't realize what I am saying. I am thinking, "That person is not qualified, and therefore I am not going to listen to what he is saying." But what I forget is that the ultimate source of that criticism is God himself. There is something about me that he wants to correct. It may not be that specific thing--the criticism may be unjust--but it may be my defensive, retaliatory spirit, my tendency to fly up in my own defense at a moment's notice, or some other area of my life that God is trying to get at.

Therefore, you need to see that behind that criticism, behind that foul mouth, that cheap shot, whatever it was you experienced this past week, is the hand of God. That is God working on you. He is the ultimate source of that criticism. Therefore, you cannot take it lightly and brush it off. You cannot just forget it; you need to take it seriously.

Another thing I see about David's response is that he relies upon God's defense. God will defend him. He could very well have taken things into his own hands. Certainly Abishai could have dispatched Shimei at a moment's notice--or David could have. He was no weakling. But David passes over the opportunity to defend himself or to retaliate in any way and he relies upon the Lord to take care of him, to defend him, to minister to his need. Look at verse 12:

"Perhaps the Lord will look on my sin and return good to me instead of his cursing this day."

David recognizes that he is sinful. The thing that makes us respond in the wrong way to criticism is that we do recognize that we are sinful. We are vulnerable. We are weak. And we don't like to be shown up for what we are. Therefore, when someone says, "You sin," we fly around in defense. "No, I don't sin!" We want to cover up, to look good. We want to protect ourselves.

But David recognizes that he cannot defend himself. He could never look good, no matter what he did. Only God can defend him. It is God who declares him righteous. It is God who accepts us the way we are, even with our sin. Therefore we can relax in our sin, we can be comfortable with it--we don't have to go on sinning, but the fact that we fail shouldn't threaten us. God accepts us, and therefore we don't care what other people think. So, when they criticize us, instead of trying to defend ourselves, we can let God defend us.

We know from the subsequent history of David's reign that God did defend him. He restored his glory to him again. Shimmi's mouth was shut and David was vindicated. God did it. And even in that situation in Bahurim, it says, "he refreshed himself," an indication that even there David took heart in the Lord and rested. And God took over and set things right.

Whenever we go out and try to repair all the damage that has been done, invariably we make a worse mess of things. Have you ever noticed that? Someone criticizes us, so we go around explaining to someone else what we did. Then we have to explain our explanation, and then we start writing letters, and before long we are posting notices--it gets absurd! We can't defend ourselves. Don't defend yourself. You can make an explanation, but don't get defensive.

I know that when it comes to accepting situations, I am just as defensive as you are. But we shouldn't defend ourselves. We should let God

defend us. He does it so much better. He sets everything to rest. We can rest in his ability to set things right. Jesus did. 1 Peter 2:23 says that when Jesus was reviled "he did not revile, but he committed himself to the one who is able to judge justly." Jesus was charged with every sort of sin and impropriety you could name, and yet he did not defend himself. He committed himself to the one who judges justly.

Years ago we had a series of leadership breakfasts here. Doug Coe, from Washington D.C., and Jim Hiskey, and a number of other men came out from the East Coast and were here leading us in these evangelistic breakfasts for our civic leadership. The team was staying at one of the nice hotels in our area and the hotel had very graciously given them a room in which to meet. But because the food wasn't too good at the hotel, they were going to the hotel across the street to eat, where the food was better and cheaper.

One day a number of us were standing in the lobby of this hotel and the hotel manager came across the lobby. We could tell from the way he approached Doug that he was very angry (red in the face, steam coming from both ears, etc.). He said, "Mr. Coe, I understand you men have been eating across the street." The manager got very abusive, very angry, and carried on a tirade for a moment or so about how unfair that was. After all, the hotel had given them a room to meet in and other benefits. Doug looked at him when he was through, then said, "You know, you are absolutely right. We have been handling this thing wrong and I want to apologize. As far as I am concerned, from now on we will eat right here in the hotel." Of course, the guy was blown right off his feet. He didn't know what to say.

I thought at the time it was a beautiful illustration of a soft answer turning away wrath. But more than that, it was an illustration of meekness, for that is what nondefensiveness is. Doug didn't defend himself. I would have given the manger fourteen reasons why that hotel failed to fulfill its responsibilities and therefore we were eating across the street. But Doug didn't defend himself; he accepted the criticism. There is a man who is comfortable with his sins. He knows he fails. He knows he is weak. He knows he makes mistakes. He doesn't do everything right all the time, and so he can let God defend him. He doesn't have to defend himself.

That is what I think we can learn from Shimei. Criticism is bound to come, it is bound to come from people we don't respect, at times when we don't need it, and in ways that we find hard to re-ceive. And yet we don't need to defend ourselves. We can see that this is God speaking to us in a very direct way. He wants to get our attention and to make us more like his Son, Jesus Christ. In the meantime, we can rely upon him to defend us.

Gracious Father, we long to be as David was in this cir-cumstance--quiet, and restful in reliance upon you and your ability to set things right. This is the desire of our hearts, and we ask that you would teach us that. Help us to see that you are at work in all affairs of life to per-fect us, you are the one who is able to exceed every ex-pectation that we have, and you are the one who can de-fend us so well. We rest in that, and thank you for it, in Christ's name, Amen.

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[Back to home Page](#)

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