

# MESSAGE TRANSCRIPT //

I WILL DEAL WITH CRITICISM IN HEALTHY WAYS | SET LIKE FLINT

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Well, it's good to be with you today. If you have a Bible, go ahead and head over to 1 Peter, chapter 4. That's our primary passage we're going to be in together today—1 Peter 4.

And as you're finding that and getting settled in, this past week, on Thursday, I made a trip to the BMV to renew my driver's license and the experience actually went a lot better than I thought it would, primarily because the lady who was helping me was very kind, very sweet, super helpful.

And when we got done, at the end of the transaction, she said, "Hey, there is going to be a screen that pops up in front of you. If you could, please rate the service that I've given you today."

And then these two little images popped up. You've seen these before. A green smiley face, red frowny face. It seems a little drastic if you ask me. It's like, "Is there any option in the middle? You know? I was actually very helpful or glad to give her a green smiley face because she was super helpful, and she seemed relieved when I told her that.

As I walked out I told myself, "Man, that is brutal. Like, after every single transaction she's got to ask that question, have that done right in front of her. Could you imagine after every interaction that you have with somebody, whether a personal conversation or a professional interaction, you hold up a screen and say, "Hey, could you please rate this interaction?" It's either a green smiley face or a frowny face.

I thought about that. If we had kiosks on the way out the door for you to rate the sermon, either a green smiley face or red—I quit. I quit. That's just too much, man. That's brutal. So, I'm just wondering... That's kind of the world in which we live. It almost seems that drastic. Either people are totally pleased with you, or they are not.

So, I'm just kind of curious. How many of you have faced criticism here lately? Come on man. Raise up those hands around the room. Yeah. How many of you have ever been criticized and it was unfair, unfounded, and unkind. There we go. A lot more hands. I don't know how that works.

I remember the first time that I got criticized and remember tangibly thinking, "That was so unfair." I was in grade school. It was actually from a friend of mine, and we were on the outs for some reason. I can't even remember why. And we came in from recess, single file line at the water fountain. I'm right behind him. And he didn't know it. And he



starts trashing on me, just criticizing me. A couple of our mutual friends elbowed him and were like, "Hey, Aaron is right behind you." And I'll never forget his words. He goes, "I don't care."

I remember those words pierced my little insecure heart right there in that moment. And I remember thinking to myself, "One day, when I grow up, I'm going to pick a profession where I don't have to face very much criticism." That didn't work out very well. Alright?

Judging by your response, you already know what I'm talking about. Over the last 25 years or so, being a pastor, I've faced my fair share of criticism. Some of it was deserved and much of it was not.

So, I brought a few emails to share. You guys want to hear a few emails? Yeah. Some of you are cheering and some of you are like, "Oh, no." Relax. I'm not going to throw you under the bus. You know who you are. Keeping names out of this. Not reading anything extensive. Just little excerpts. These are mostly lighthearted.

Here's one. And these are over my breadth of time here at Traders Point. Some of these are old. "Pastor Aaron, please don't wear that shirt again, I didn't like it." Okay. Alright. This is probably my favorite one, "Pastor Aaron, would you please pray that God would help you prepare better, you're confusing me." I'll see what I can do. "Pastor Aaron, you're trying too hard. Please take a vacation." I think I will. I think I will.

This one, I actually took this one to heart and implemented this. "Pastor Aaron, please trim your beard. It's not a good look." Now, this is where... Some of you have been in our church for a while and you remember that I went through a phase where I started to grow out my beard because I thought that the length of my beard was connected to the strength of my biceps, like a Sampson kind of a thing. Turns out it's not. Didn't look very good. I trimmed it. I listened to that criticism.

One last one. "Pastor Aaron, when is Pastor Ryan preaching again? God really speaks through him." That's not funny. And I had to actually go home and ask my wife what she meant by that. Alright?

A lot of those I can laugh at, but some criticisms, man, they hit below the belt, and they hurt. A few years ago, when my kids were really little (they are older now) but when they were really little, I'd been preaching all day, it was after an evening service. I got done and we had food trucks outside so everybody could get kind of a cheap meal after the service. And I was outside.

My wife met up with me. I was preaching all day. That meant that she was full-time mommying all day with our four kids. She came up. She had to take our youngest somewhere. So, she handed off the older three to me, "Here, tag. You're it." And they were hungry. So, I needed to get them some food.

Now, when she handed them off to me, if I recall, one of them was crying, one of them had a runny nose, and one of them was pooping their pants. I'm pretty sure that was what was going on. And they are hungry.

So, I'm leaning down. I remember getting down on my knees like this, and I was like, "What do you want to eat?" And I'm trying to figure out how to order them food, to get them some food.

As I'm talking to them this young couple walks up to me, who didn't have kids, by the way, and this may be even more important, they didn't acknowledge mine. And they came up and they were like, "Pastor Aaron." I'm trying to like "Hey."

They had just moved here. Just started coming to church. And they were like, "We're so excited to join the church. So excited to meet you. We didn't know that you were going to be out here." All of that kind of stuff.

I'm trying to be a dad and now a pastor—failing at both. And so, in that moment I had to choose. So, I was like, "Love you. I've got to attend to my kids." So, I couldn't fully dial in with them. I remember the conversation got a little weird and they left. I remember thinking, there was a check in my spirit. I was like, "Ah, that didn't go very well."

Monday, my suspicion was solidified because an email came in like a hang grenade. And they just let me have it. They were like, "It was so clear that you didn't want to talk to us." And maybe what hurt more than anything else is they said, "You are not the man you present yourself to be on stage. And because of that we are going to be finding another church good sir."

I remember walking away from the email going, "Man, that was so unfair and so harsh." Immediately I wrote back a response and I apologized. I said, "Listen. I was trying to tend to my kids and I'm so sorry. This is just a misunderstanding. Would love to meet you guys when I can be more fully present." And no response.

Develop the courage of a lion, the skin of a rhino, and the heart of a teddy bear

I had a mentor say this to me early on in my ministry. He said, "Aaron, if you're going to go the distance in ministry, if you're going to finish well," I'll never forget this, "You've got to develop the courage of a lion because sometimes you're going to have to say some things that people don't want to hear, and you're going to have to develop the skin of a rhino because the arrows of criticism are going to come, but have the heart of a teddy bear."

Here's another was of saying it, "You've got to have thick skin and a soft heart because the alternative is a thin skin and a hard heart."

And I would say this is not a message about how to handle criticism as a pastor because most of you are not in fulltime ministry. However, many of you are trying to

follow after Jesus in a world that isn't going to like it. So, this isn't just true for being a pastor, this is true for being a human being who wants to honor God and serve Him well.

If you're going to do that, if you're going to follow after Jesus faithfully in this world, not just a belief only thing, but if it matters to the decisions that you make, your lifestyle, the things that you say, then criticism is just inevitable.

Maybe you've heard this quote before by a guy named Elbert Hubbard. He said:

"To avoid criticism, do nothing, say nothing, and be nothing."

And I would actually like to criticize that statement, "Elbert, that might have been true in the world in which you lived when you said that. But not anymore." Because the world in which we live today, it doesn't matter what you say, it doesn't matter what you do or don't do, say or don't say, you are going to be criticized. There is no such thing as, "I'm just going to hunker down in the corner over here and avoid all criticism." It's impossible. And especially if you want to follow after Jesus faithfully in this world in which we live.

Here's what criticism does. It reveals where we are seeking affirmation. Are we seeking the affirmation of others? Which, by the way, isn't a totally bad thing, there are some nuances to this. That's called emotional intelligence. If you are just like, "I don't care what anybody thinks," that's unhealthy too. However, if you are hijacked by people's opinions of you, and you're seeking their approval or affirmation over God's approval and affirmation, that's a big problem.

And I want to quickly draw a distinction here between criticism that is harsh and unexpected and unfair, and constructive criticism. Those are not the same. Helpful feedback—we all need to be open to feedback. Why? Because we don't know everything and we've got blind spots. And we're imperfect sinners. So, we need people to speak into our lives. You need to listen to somebody. You just don't need to listen to everybody.

I just offer that little distinction because I don't want you to receive this message and think I'm saying that you don't ever need to listen to somebody else's opinion or perspective. What I am saying is that harsh, unfair, unfounded, and unexpected criticism, when it comes your way, (especially those of you who maybe have a bigger platform, or depending upon your role at work, or whatever it is) if you don't know how to handle that, it will eventually impact your heart, turning you into somebody you don't want to be.

A friend of mine said it this way:

"If you allow the arrows of criticism to pierce your heart, you will bleed bitterness on everyone around you."

And one of the things that we're trying to do as a church... I just want you to be really clear about the church you walked into or that you're a part of, we're not trying to grow a great big church. In fact, I try to say things every now and then that empty a few seats.

We're not trying to draw crowds or even just make converts. We are trying to build—I like this phrase—durable disciples. Not cardboard Christians who get blown over by the criticism and the cultural winds that blow your way, but Christians who have learned to cauterize the nerve of wanting to be liked too much, saying, “You know what? I'm going to develop a little bit of a backbone here,”

Now listen, there's a caution here because increasingly it's becoming more and more difficult to do, to boldly follow after Jesus while maintaining a soft heart and disposition. Because there are two errors that Christ followers and churches can fall into.

Separatism (abrasively legalistic and hostile to the world around us)

The first error would be into the pit of separatism. Maybe you grew up in a church like this. A little bit abrasive, legalistic, hostile to the world around us. The preaching was like hell, fire, and brimstone. Kind of angry. Just like, “Rah!” And it's just separate from the world. The world is the enemy—separate, separate, separate, separate.

That's a pitfall we can fall into. However, we've got to be careful that we don't oversteer into the other pitfall, which I see increasingly today. We've got to be cautious of syncretism.

Syncretism (calling ourselves Christians while adopting godless ideologies, calling it “compassion” or “empathy”)

And that is calling ourselves Christians but because of the fears of being criticized by others, we adopt godless ideologies in the name of compassion or empathy.

And what pushes us into either of those errors is criticism. We don't know how to hear it. We don't know how to receive it and process it and respond to it. So, either we get hard hearted and combative—separatism, or we begin to cave, and it goes to our heart and that makes us susceptible to syncretism.

So, we've got to develop some godly grit. And this series that we've been in (this is week three) comes out of Isaiah, chapter 50, verse 7, “We are setting our faces like flint.”

Here's today's sermon in a sentence. It's a declaration. I'm just wondering if you'd be willing to read these words out loud with me:

I will not let inevitable criticism crush me. People's opinion of me will not keep me from being obedient to God and trusting His plan for me. I will live for an audience of One.

Our passage today, the context of it is Peter is writing to Christians in the first century. We're going to be in chapter 4, but in chapter 1, here's the word that he uses to describe genuine followers of Jesus in this world. You know what it is? Foreigners. He says, "You are a foreigner."

In other words, if you've visited another country in which you were a foreigner, you didn't know the language. You didn't know the cultural customs. You didn't know which side of the street you're driving on. You felt just a little bit awkwardly out of place, even though there might be some friendly faces there. You just don't fully feel at ease.

That's kind of the whole concept of 1 Peter. He says, "If you feel at too much ease in this world, that's not a good sign." Actually, you are here, this is temporary. This is not our eternal home. You are in this world as ambassadors of another kingdom, therefore expect to be misunderstood and criticized and maligned unfairly.

And he says this in chapter 4, verses 12 through 19:

"Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. Instead, be very glad—for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world.

"If you are insulted because you bear the name of Christ, you will be blessed, for the glorious Spirit of God rests upon you. If you suffer, however, it must not be for murder, stealing, making trouble, or prying into other people's affairs."

Did you hear what he just said? "Hey, that's not a bad thing for you to be insulted for genuinely following after Jesus." He's like, 'I'm not talking about being a jerk for Jesus, I'm talking about genuinely following Jesus and don't confuse the two.'

Verse 16:

"But it is no shame to suffer for being a Christian. Praise God for the privilege of being called by his name! For the time has come for judgment, and it must begin with God's household."

In other words, God is beginning to clean house starting within His own house. If revival is ever going to come, which we've been talking about, God will deal with His own house.

"And if judgment begins with us, what terrible fate awaits those who have never obeyed God's Good News? And also, 'If the righteous are barely saved, what will happen to godless sinners?' So if you are suffering in a manner that pleases God, keep on doing what is right, and trust your lives to the God who created you, for he will never fail you."  
(NLT)

I've got five observations that I want to share with you today about how we listen to, receive, process, and respond to criticism. Here's number one:

If you don't anticipate criticism, it will debilitate you

If you don't anticipate it, it will debilitate you. Peter says it this way, "Don't be surprised at the fiery trial that you are going through. Now fiery trial is not just exclusively criticism, but it certainly includes it.

When you are going through a barrage of criticism, when you feel like you can't make anybody happy, whether that's in your marriage, your family, at work, in the community—wherever it is, it feels like a fiery trial. And it feels like something strange is happening to you. You're like, "Man, I can't get anything right."

One of the things that makes criticism so difficult is that most of the time, we just never see it coming, and it hurts so much more. It's kind of like in football, if the quarterback can see the defensive lineman coming his way and he knows he's going to get tackled he can brace for it. But, man, the blindsided hits those hurt so much.

That's what happens in criticism. Isn't it? Especially from somebody who you thought you could trust. See, oftentimes what ends up happening is the people pleaser that is within us—where are my people pleasers? There we go. Yeah, man. Some of you are afraid to raise your hand. You're like, "I don't know. I don't know if I should publicly admit that I'm a people pleaser."

The people pleaser that is within all of us, what ends up happening is we think that we can avoid criticism by giving people what they want or trying to meet all of their expectations or trying to say all of the right things. And then after exhausting ourselves trying to people please or avoid confrontation you still get taken out with criticism. At that point you just waive the white flag. You get knocked down. And it knocks the emotional and spiritual wind out of you. You don't want to get up.

What hurts even more is when criticism comes from somebody who we thought we could trust, somebody we thought had our backs or were in our corner. But as it turns out, they weren't.

It's just like last week when I said that Jesus was the perfect sinless, spotless Son of God and yet He even faced temptation. So, if Jesus, in His perfection, was still going to be tempted, then we can expect, as imperfect sinners, that we're going to be tempted all the more. Same thing is true with criticism.

Arguably there is nobody in the Scriptures who got criticized more than Jesus. And He was perfect. Some of you, maybe you've never heard that, you've never thought about it that way before and you're thinking, "Now, wait a second. Everybody loved Jesus." No, they didn't. At one time they wanted to throw Him off a cliff. And they eventually crucified Him. And He was perfect.





Jesus would say these words in John 15, one of the greatest teachings about staying connected to Him, we just abide. That's the only role that we have. We just stay connected to Jesus. He's the one who bears the fruit.

And Jesus, right after He teaches all of this, says these really, really sobering words that when you begin to embrace them, they actually set you free. He says in verse 18:

"If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first." (NLT)

And then down in verse 20 it says:

"Since they persecuted me," and what's implied here is that if you are genuinely following after me, then "naturally they will persecute you." (NLT)

This brings up a really, really sobering thought. And I'm not talking about being abrasive, I'm not talking about being separatist, I'm not talking about being mean-spirited as a Christian—there is certainly that segment of the body of Christ—I'm talking about genuinely and compassionately wanting to follow after Jesus in the tension of grace and truth. He says that you will likely be hated for that because they hated Him. You will be persecuted for that because they persecuted Him.

It brings up a really sobering question. If, as a follower of Jesus you are never being criticized, never being hated on, never being persecuted you've got to ask yourself, "Am I genuinely following Him?"

That's a question that we really don't like to ask or want to ask. And we come up with all of the loopholes, "Well, I know such and such who is a jerk for Jesus and I don't want to be like that." I'm not talking about them. I'm talking about being faithful to God and seeking after the approval of God, because, man, if you get criticized and come against by the world enough times, if you're not careful, separatism is not your problem, syncretism is.

And Jesus says, "In those moments..." On down in verses 25 and 26, He offers us this. He says:

"They hated me without cause. But I will send you the Advocate," notice that it is in upper case, I'll say why here in just a minute, He says, "the Spirit of truth." (NLT)

The reason why Advocate is capitalized is because He's talking about the Holy Spirit. So, last week I said that the word for the Holy Spirit is paraclete, that's the word helper. So, when you find yourself in the octagon of temptation don't just try to fight the temptation on your own, tag the Helper, the Holy Spirit and He'll come in and kick some booty. That was essentially (I'm paraphrasing) what I said.

So, this week He's not just a Helper, He's an Advocate. I love that. So, Jesus is essentially saying, "Hey, man. You're going to be criticized. You're going to be come against. People are going to say things and accuse you of things, but you've got an



Advocate who will defend you, the Spirit of Truth.” Meaning that the Holy Spirit, God, will rectify that stuff. Your reputation is just who other people think you are. Your character is who you really are.

So, He says, “You’re not going to be able, necessarily, to convince them anyway so don’t try to. You just keep your eyes fixed up Jesus and your Advocate, the Spirit of Truth, will justify you at the right time.

Number two:

If you must respond, you’ll never regret a gentle response

Now, from my experience, most criticism, not all, but most doesn’t need a response. We don’t hear that enough. We live in a society that kind of says that we’re obligated to respond. You are not obligated to respond. In fact, the wisest thing in any scenario is at least for a period of time you wait before you respond, at bare minimum. Or maybe no response, especially if the criticism comes to you on social media.

Listen, once again, to Peter’s wisdom on this prior to social media. He says in chapter 2, he is referring to Jesus:

“He did not retaliate when he was insulted, nor threaten revenge when he suffered. He left his case in the hands of God, who always judges fairly.” 1 Peter 2:23 (NLT)

Now, with that said, let’s just say you need to respond to the criticism. In the rare instance when the person criticizing you wasn’t through an email or DM or online, but they had the courage and the courtesy to actually have a conversation with you face to face. Then what do you say?

I’m going to get super, super practical. Here’s one thing that you might just consider:

Consider the source

Consider the source of the criticism. Your response should be determined by the source of the criticism. In other words, who is saying this? Let’s just start with bare minimums. Do you have a relationship with them? Do you even know them? Do they love Jesus? Are they demonstrating Galatians 5 the fruit of the Spirit in their life? What are those? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control, which is severely lacking on social media.

Are they emotionally stable? What is the dynamic of your relationship? Are they sober-minded in their approach? You can come up with a bunch of other questions that you might add to this. These questions determine the credibility of the criticism and how and even if you should respond.

Here’s a good rule of thumb:

Never receive criticism from someone you wouldn’t take counsel from



However, if you would take counsel from them, then take the criticism from them as well.

Consider the emotions

Consider the emotions of the person bringing the criticism to you. Here's what I mean by that. Are they disproportionate to the issue at hand? In other words, this is the first time they're talking about it and they are coming in hot. They are angry. They are hostile. They've already been judge and jury. They are assuming the worst of your motives and intentions rather than the best. Instead of having a benevolent bias toward you, they've already labeled you the other way.

How about this? Have you ever been talking to somebody and they are so angry with you and you're like, "We don't know each other well enough for you to feel this strongly." And in those moments, if you're not careful, you end up catching their emotions, which just stir yours and no longer are you sober-minded.

Hey, listen. The Bible warns us about getting drunk with drink, but there are other kinds of drunkenness. You can get drunk on emotions. And it's all over right now. So, what ends up happening... Think about somebody who comes to you in a rage or with anger or disproportionate emotions, they are drunk and that's infectious if you're not sober minded. So, what ends up happening is it stirs your emotions. You get all angsty and you're like, "Blah." And it's like throwing water on a grease fire, it just explodes.

We see this happen all of the time on social media. Remember:

When emotion is high, wisdom is low

That's why Ecclesiastes, chapter 7 warns us about being quickly provoked in your spirit. It says, "For anger resides in the lap of fools."

For those of you who are leading anything, whether in the home or the marketplace, I highly encourage you to read this book by Joe Rigney called Leadership and Emotional Sabotage. In it he says this:

"For every true act of courageous leadership," what does that mean? You've got to make a decision, and you know it's the right decision, but people are not going to like it, courageous leadership. He says, "...you can expect an equal and emotional act of sabotage."

This is called parenting. Right? This is called, you've got to lead a group of people at work. Whatever. Maybe for you you're trying to please your board of supervisors. Whatever it is, people may get upset and they come at you with emotion, and they may be sabotaging good, sound thinking but they don't have all of the data.

It isn't that you shouldn't be listening to them, just don't catch their emotion and throw it back at them. Because, right now, what the world needs more than ever is sober-minded

men, women, and students who will not irrationally respond to the ungodly emotions of others, which will then push them either into compromise or cowardness.

Is this resonating with anybody? I hope so. All three hours have been really, really quiet and people tell me it's just because people are convicted. I don't know. I don't know. I'm going to get a frowny face. I just feel it.

Consider if a response is needed

Consider if a response is needed. You don't have to respond to every criticism, especially if it's from somebody who you don't know and it's on social media. See, oftentimes the one delivering the impersonal or disproportionate criticism, is just looking to get a rise out of you. They are wanting a response. They are trying to drive clicks to their monetized websites. They are trying to build their platform. They know it's going to mess with you. The algorithms are so appealing. Don't take the bait. You don't need to always defend yourself.

Your friends don't need an explanation, and your enemies won't believe you, no matter what you say

And they likely won't receive an apology from you either, no matter how sincere you really are. Therefore, 2 Timothy 4:5, "Keep a clear mind in every situation."

You've heard the phrase, when you wrestle with a pig, the pig likes it and you're the one who ends up dirty. Is that the first time you've heard that? Not original with me. So, don't email me.

With all of that said, if you feel like a response is needed, you'll never regret a gentle one. Listen. You can actually give good sound truth gently. And a gentle response is oftentimes the wisest response.

I've had to learn all of these lessons the hard way. Over the years, whenever I receive an overly harsh email, first of all I have to follow my own counsel here: consider the source. And if I look into it and I say, "Oh, okay. This is a person who is actually a part of our church, or I've met them one time or we're in relationship or whatever and this doesn't seem to be fully tracking with who I know them to be. There must be something going on here. I'm a little unclear as to where the criticism is coming from. They are upset." I don't email them back.

On a rare occasion, I'll pick up the phone and call them. And two things happen: Number one, I can't think of a single conversation where I've done that where the tone didn't immediately change when they heard my voice. And they are a little surprised. For the carnal side of me, it's kind of fun. "Hey, this is Pastor Aaron."

"Oh, I didn't expect you to call." And immediately the tone changes.



I was trying to think about this in the times that I've done this over the years. I can't think of a single conversation that didn't go well. No matter how mad they were or upset they were about it, we were able to have a conversation, and we weren't straw manning each other. We could hear the nuances. We could hear the tone. And it always gave me an opportunity to be pastoral and speak to a need in their life. I'll expand more on that in a minute.

Let's go on once again to the wisdom of Proverbs. Chapter 15, one through 2:

"A gentle answer deflects anger, but harsh words make tempers flare. The tongue of the wise makes knowledge appealing, but the mouth of a fool belches out foolishness."  
(NLT)

Verse 4:

"Gentle words are a tree of life." (NLT)

Can I just encourage you? Speak gently. If you have to respond, be gentle in your response. Don't catch their raging emotions. Here's just a couple of tools for your tool belt. When you get something that comes in, just wait before you respond—it's a good 24-hour rule, "Let me sleep on it." Very rarely do good things happen when you just fire back a response. So, just wait.

Maybe ask a friend. Carefully put together a response, whether it's a post on social media or an email and ask a trusted friend to read your response and ask them if you should send it before you do.

Now, once again I've unfortunately had to learn this the hard way. Several years ago, we were teaching through the gospel of John, and I got to kind of a tricky passage where I had to consult some commentaries and some theologians on how to interpret it. I came to a conclusion and offered an explanation. And there was a guy in our church, a really serious kind of Bible guy, which I can respect because I'd like to think I'm a really serious Bible guy. He disagreed with my assessment.

But he took it a step further. He actually thought that I was ashamed of God's word and was trying to water it down. So, he sent me this scathing email just laying into me, which really made me angry. It stirred up all of my emotions. How dare he?

Basically, I did the opposite of everything I'm telling you to do today. I spent way too much time putting an email back right at the moment I got it. And what I did was I consulted all of the commentaries. I cut and pasted them into the email. I went and I quoted three or four really reputable theologians who all essentially said what I said, and it was overkill. I pummeled him. It was verbal jiu-jitsu. It was so good. And when I hit send, I was like, "Oh, that feels so good."

You know what his response was? He emailed me back a couple of hours later and he repented. He told me how sorry he was. He said I was the best Bible teacher on the planet. The next weekend I baptized him at Eagle Creek. And then we rented a tandem bike and road down the Monon trail singing Friends are Friend Forever.

No, man. None of that happened. What do you think happened? He emailed me back. He gave a slight little half-sentence of acknowledgement that maybe he overreacted, that he didn't know that the other theologians thought that. And then, unbelievably, he doubled down, dug in, and started disagreeing with them.

That's when I realized, "Okay, this isn't about the thing. There is a thing under this one." The most irrational, harsh, nasty criticism is usually not about that. There is something else. Which leads me to number three:

Behind every unfair criticism is likely a deep-seated pain

Behind every unfair criticism, I didn't say every criticism, I said unfair criticism is likely a deep-seated pain. If the criticism is irrational, mean, unfair, disproportionate then likely there is a wounded person firing that criticism. And they haven't healed. They are hurting.

A mean-spirited, overly opinionated person is wounded. And they are projecting that hurt onto you and onto others, which is why you should not get drawn into a knife fight on social media. It's a whole bunch of hurting people who are trying to regulate themselves. They are trying to make themselves feel better and it gives them a momentary sense of relief, but not long-term.

In Matthew 15 Jesus would say it this way:

"Anything you eat passes through the stomach and then goes into the sewer." That's a wonderful word image right before lunch. "But the words you speak come from the heart – that's what defiles you." Matthew 15:17-18 (NLT)

So, He says, "Man, if it comes out of your mouth it started in your heart." And so many harsh comments on social media are from people who are hurting, they are lashing out, they are trying to regulate themselves like a baby with an upset tummy that throws up all over you. And the baby feels better but now it's at your expense.

That is why you've got to be so discerning. This is just one of the reasons why if somebody drops a comment on our church's social media platform or on my personal one...

Now hear me carefully, hear my heart in this, I'm not saying that you can never disagree with something and say so on our church's social media or mine or ask a good question or anything like that. I am saying that if you drop a comment and it's harsh, mean spirited, deceptive, and it's trying to rile things up we will remove it.

There are a lot of people who really get bent out of shape over that. They feel entitled. If they say it then their comment has to stay up. It doesn't have to stay up because it's our house. And if it's deceptive and sort of mean spirited and is trying to stir people up, we can take that down.

Listen. If somebody came over to your house today, your physical house, and they walked in the door and walked into your kitchen (forgive me for the disturbing nature of this visual) and they decided to relieve themselves on your kitchen counter then they leave, you're not going to leave it. You're going to clean it up. And that would be the same thing that is true on social media. We're not obligated to keep that.

Now, listen. You've got a question, there are appropriate channels to ask that and to have constructive conversations around things so that we can pastor you.

Listen. I have never met an emotionally healthy, spiritually mature, biblically astute follower of Jesus who just consistently and intentionally shreds people. Now, have I met Christians who have their moments? You bet ya. I've had a moment. Here's the difference. You realize it when you do, and you seek to make amends, and you clean it up and you offer repair.

But, man, if you just keep doing it... The Bible talks about this when it comes to our speech. It offers this image. If there was a water cooler that you would go to for water and you filled up and you were parched and you needed to quench your thirst, but one out of every nine times you went to that water cooler there was bitter salt water, eventually you'd avoid the water cooler.

The same thing is true when we are loose with our speech. You say, "Well, you know it's just one time out of 10." Yeah, but given enough times that's pretty often. We're having lots of conversations. So, we've got to make sure that even though we might have a moment, that we repent of it, that we offer clean up around it, and that we deal with the pain.

This is what leads me to the next point—point number four:

Your initial response to criticism is a signal as to what's going on within you spiritually and emotionally

Can I say this? Whether the criticism is deserved or undeserved it doesn't matter if it's harsh or if it's got some credibility to it. Oftentimes I'm learning that when an unexpected or harsh criticism comes my way, it's really unfortunate and it's painful, but I'm learning to see it as a blessing because it will reveal to me the condition of my heart faster than anything else.

Here's what I mean. Let's just say an unexpected or harsh criticism comes in and I'm able to shrug it off like water off of a duck's back. I'm able to laugh it off. I'm able to offer a sober-minded response to it. Or I internalize it, and I don't deal with it, or I start

ruminating on it. Here's where it usually comes out. I get into a moment of stress. I get into a moment of loneliness or boredom. Usually for me it's when I'm in the car all by myself, nobody is around, and somebody cuts me off in traffic. And I lose it. It's a disproportionate response to what just happened. And that's an indicator to me that I'm not dealing with some stuff at a heart level. When harsh criticism comes my way, I've got to recognize—okay am I dealing with it appropriately? Am I running on fumes?

See, this is deeply personal for me because as you might imagine not only being a pastor...

The platform that God has chosen to bless me with, temporarily might I add, this is a temporary stewardship, one day I'll hand this all over, I'm saving all of the emails to read on the last day... One day I'll hand this all over, so it's a temporary stewardship.

I never got into this to grow a big church. I never got into this to preach to thousands of people. I got into this because I wanted to help people.

I remember when I was 19 I was working part time at a counselling office and all of the counselors were out. I was just answering the phones. And this lady called in and she was emotional. She was upset and she was despondent. And nobody else was around. I'm 19! I just started listening to her and I'm trying to encourage her. And I didn't know what to say so I just prayed for her.

And I'll never forget at the end of the conversation she said, "The tone of your voice is so comforting. I feel the Spirit of God. Thank you." That is the first time that anybody had said that to me. And I remember getting off the phone, hanging up, and I was like, "God, could You use me to do that for my whole life?" That was the beginning of getting into this.

And if you would have said to that 19-year-old kid who just got off the phone, "Hey, you do this you're in for a boat load of criticism," I don't know that I would have done it. But I'm so glad that I did.

Can I just ask you this? I don't say that to make you feel sorry for me. If I'm your pastor, I'm asking a couple of things here. I'm asking that you would pray for me because here's the pitfall that a lot of times can happen.

Some of you are like, listening to my story are like, "You're not my pastor." You're visiting. You're watching online. That's great. So, whoever your pastor is, this applies to them. Please don't idolize your pastor. He's just a man. Same Holy Spirit living in him is living in you. Don't idolize him. Now, God's anointing is upon him, he's been given a different responsibility—that whole you should not teach because you'll be judged more severely thing.

God has entrusted me to not be a teller of the gospel, but a steward of it. So, I've got to steward it well, which means I've got to keep us out of separatism, legalistic Christianity,



and I've got to keep us out of syncretism, watering things down. I've got to thread the needle, and I've got to do that with the Spirit of Jesus.

I need you to pray for me and not to idolize me. Man, if you're coming here because you like the preaching, it's just a matter of time before this will end poorly because I'll preach a bad sermon and you're out. Or I'll fail to meet your expectations and you're out. Or I'll offend you and you're out. We'll talk about that next week. Oh goody.

So, don't idolize me. Don't come here for anyone else other than Jesus. Because if you idolize somebody, it's just a step or two before you demonize whenever they fail to meet your expectations or whenever they offend you in any way, shape, or form.

Would you pray that I would stay faithful to the Scriptures? Meaning that God has asked me to steward the gospel, which means that I've got to teach the whole counsel of God. The Bible puts it this way: preach the word in season and out of season.

In season means those sermons where everybody is like, "Preach it. Hallelujah. Amen." And then there are those sermons where they are giving you the bird on the way out. And I've got to be faithful to the word of God, which means if you just sit under my teaching enough, if I'm faithful to the Scriptures, there will be something said that offends you because there is an offense to the gospel.

The good news is not good until you understand how bad it is. Which leads me to the fifth point. I'm going to wrap up here:

When we crave the approval of others, then we'll be crushed by their criticism

See, Satan will not try to convince you to lose your faith, go apostate, or de-convert. No, he'll just get you to crave the approval of others over God's and say that you're just being personable.

He'll take that part of you that likes to be liked and exploit it. And it's not a bad thing to want other people's approval. In fact, an emotionally intelligent person is going to be considerate of what other people think. But when we turn it into an idol that is when we begin to look to the affirmation of others rather than God.

So, if you are consistently getting crushed or going into a rage because somebody criticized you, that's a big red flag that something is wrong or out of order in your heart or that you're looking too much to the affirmation of others, rather than the approval of God.

At some point in your Christian journey, you're going to have to cauterize the nerve that wants to be liked too much and you're going to have to develop a backbone, not a callousness, I'm talking about a soft heart and a thick skin rather than a thin skin and a hard heart.

Right now, some of you may be bending your knee for the approval of others, the spirit of the age, rather than bending your knee to the only God who deserves your praise and your admiration so that you would glorify Him and Him alone. I want to give you the opportunity to turn that around today and maybe realize, "I've been searching after the affirmation of others way too much, rather than the approval of God."

Some of you are like, "I grew up in a church with a lot of Christians who were just mean spirited, and I don't want to be like that." And I admire that and affirm that in you. Just don't oversteer in the other direction.

So, if you would right now at all of our locations, if you would stand to your feet. Let's wrap up our time together by, one more time, repeating this declaration out loud together. Say it with me out loud.

I will not let inevitable criticism crush me. People's opinion of me will not keep me from being obedient to God and trusting His plan for me. I will live for an audience of One.

Let me pray for you today.

Father, I thank You so much for the truth of Your word, the parts of it that make me feel so good, and the parts that bring me to this place of conviction where I need to repent of sin instead of accommodate for it.

So, God, I just pray that as we seek to be durable disciples that You would develop a backbone within us to recognize that we live our lives for an audience of One. It doesn't matter what we do or what we say or not say or not do, criticism comes to us, and we want You to be well pleased by how we live our lives.

So, would You please give us the strength to do that, to be sober-minded followers of Jesus seeking Your approval rather than the affirmation of others. We ask this right now in Jesus' name. And everyone says: Amen.

