

Answering Criticism

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The Lord tells us that when we have a problem with a brother, we are to talk with them about it (Matt. 18:15-17). We understand the wisdom behind this instruction. It is best for the sake of peace and unity to get things worked out as quickly as possible. And sitting down and talking with someone is the best way to do this. This instruction is easy to understand, but sometimes hard to obey. In this article, we want to discuss how we should respond when we are the person that a brother is coming to. What do we do when the criticism and accusations are directed toward us? Consider the following points.

Watch out for pride. The Scriptures never use the word pride in a good sense. John tells us that pride is one of the avenues through which Satan tempts us (1 John 2:16). It is hard not to take a confrontation from a brother as a personal attack. Our pride is at stake, and our immediate reaction is to defend it. But if we do, we are opening the door for sin. *“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing”* (James 1:2-4). Yes, our faith is going to be tested. And the fact is that sometimes our own brethren will be the ones who put us to the test. We would do well to exhibit patience when we are being confronted and challenged. According to James, patience under these circumstances is a sign of a perfect and complete Christian.

Are you sure you have to go on the defensive? Just ask yourself, “What is their demeanor? Are they sincere?” If they are, consider how hard this must be for them, listen to them patiently, and be thoughtful in your reply. Remember, *“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger”* (Prov. 15:1). Don't make a hard situation worse by thinking you have to defend your pride.

Never misuse the Scriptures. We are Christians. We believe the Bible is our guide in all matters. So when we are being challenged, we naturally want to get our Bible and defend ourselves. We need to be careful about this approach to the Bible. When we open our Bible and say, “Where is that verse? It must be in here somewhere,” we have gone to the Bible to find a verse that will justify ourselves, not to learn the truth! The Bible should not be used this way. The Scriptures were meant to equip us for every good work, not excuse us from questionable ones (2 Tim. 3:16-17). If our frame of mind is not set on a search for the truth, we had best leave our Bible alone. The Word of God must be our guide, not an afterthought.

It is not important that you be right, but that you be right with God. You shouldn't fall into the trap of trying to win the argument. If the brother challenging you is sincere and their concern is for your soul, you shouldn't be interested in shooting down their charges. If they are misunderstanding you and a discussion causes them to change their mind, you haven't won an argument, you have “gained your brother” (Matt. 18:15).

This goes back to pride. Pride tells us that it is important to be right. If we aren't careful it will cause us to try to justify ourselves and defeat their argument. We may even throw an attack back at them. We must think differently. What matters is that we are right with God. We need to be more like Paul whose desire was to live in all good conscience before God and men (Acts 23:1). When he found out that he was wrong about Jesus Christ, he changed. David exhibited this attitude as well. When Nathan convicted him of his sin, he didn't try to defend himself. He simply confessed that he had sinned against God.

Honest and sincere people have been wrong before. Why would it be any different for you or me? Show a willingness to consider their point of view. Admit that you could be wrong. This is not a sign of weakness; it's an attitude that makes you easier to approach. Having a humble attitude goes a long way in helping situations like this. They are not going to be willing to reason with you if they can see that you are unwilling to reason with them.

We need to consider our brethren. Paul taught us that even when we are right, we must be willing to forgo our liberties to keep from offending a brother (Rom. 14:13-21; 1 Cor. 8:9-13). Let's say that Paul had done something that had offended a weak or conscientious brother. His immediate concern would not be to justify his action, but to mend the brother he had "offended," "wounded" or "grieved." Just because we have the right to do something doesn't always mean that it is the right thing to do, especially if it is having an adverse effect on another Christian. *"Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others"* (Phil. 2:3-4).

Talking to brethren when things aren't going right isn't always easy. The temptation is to just ignore the instructions found in Matthew 18:15-17. Unfortunately, many brethren have taken the easy out and now are at odds with their brethren. The Lord has told us to go, but He has also told us what to do when one comes to us. Resolving disagreements depends on how criticism is received as much as on how it is delivered. *"Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another"* (Rom. 14:19).