

Handling Criticism

by Neil T. Anderson

The importance of living what we professed, maintaining composure in Christ, and being accountable to others in Christian ministry.

Duration: 1:01:44

Scripture: Psalm 119:51-71, Proverbs 9:10, Romans 5:19, 2 Peter 3:9

Topics: "Criticism"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of avoiding isolation in our spiritual journey. He warns that getting isolated and not being accountable to others can lead to trouble. He then introduces four key words: authority, accountability, affirmation, and acceptance, which he believes should be prioritized in our lives. The speaker encourages the audience to be true to themselves and not let others determine their identity. He concludes by highlighting the significance of love as the ultimate goal of Christian education.

Transcript

Dan came up yesterday and said, what would you sign this? I gave him a copy of our Bible. And I didn't know how to spell Yahweh, so I didn't. And it is a sobering thing, you know, to put your notes in the Bible.

I don't know if you've ever thought about that. I had a real neat kind of precursor to that years ago when I was going as a student to Talbot. I was president of the missions society there and got to know Dr. Feinberg quite well.

And he mentioned one time that his work on the revision, he was, I think, actually chairman of the revision for the Schofield revision Bible. I said, why did they have to revise it? I said, what did they say in the first one? He said, too much. Isn't it amazing how God will put that little thought in your mind, you know, a long time ago.

And when I came to actually sitting down and doing this thing, I said, whatever you say in here, make sure it's not too much. Something you'll regret about five years from now. So I was honored, then scared stiff at the thought of that.

Last fall I was recovering from knee surgery and I just started my conference work again. I got on a plane from Chicago to Grand Rapids and I picked up the United Airlines little magazine and there was a joke in

there, a cartoon. And it was a picture of this pastor sitting at his desk with a bookshelf off the side and his computer there, a little angel on his shoulder.

And the angel was saying to this pastor, write about what you know, write about how writing has ruined your life. You didn't think it was funny either, did you? You know, I've shared that with several people. And I called my wife, because it really had an impact on me.

I mean, it was one of those interesting things that's supposed to be a joke. And I read it to my wife and she said, it has. Well, I wasn't expecting that response either, necessarily.

But I mean, if I had to be honest with you, on a personal plane, just for myself, to live this life, to be comfortable, I would have never left Talbot. I would never have written a book. Looking back, am I glad I did? Well, yeah, it's what God wanted me to do.

If I had a personal preference, I really kind of enjoyed my time at Talbot. I missed the collegialship. Travel is hard.

You've been on the road now for about 12 years and you lose continuity of life. You can't be smart of a small group because you're gone every other week. I've got friends, but they're all over the world.

It's an interesting issue. I mean, I'm not saying this to complain, one bit, because I'm thankful for what God has done in me and my life, but it wasn't an easy road. I really had no idea, honestly.

Because it's not part of my nature, to be honest with you, but I had no idea that when you put something out there in print, that it just becomes a big target. And it brings out the meanness in the Christian community in ways that I just wasn't anticipating. I didn't expect that.

I had developed something over years, and so it wasn't new to me. And I can remember sitting there, however. It was a faculty retreat, and Bing Hunter was our dean at that time.

He went to Trinity and left there now. But I was sitting there in a small group and we were asking for prayer with each other, and I said, I think I need prayer. I said, I think God's going to want me to write something on this, and I really don't want to do it.

Frankly, I wasn't afraid of the demonic. It was the academic community. I just didn't want the hassle, to be honest with you.

And I knew it was there, and frankly, back in the 80s, this was academic suicide, isn't it, Fred? You know, and you wonder why C. Fred Dickinson got into counseling. I said, when they introduced all the faculty at Moody to the new students, this is C. Fred Dickinson. They all took it literally and went to him, and that's how he started his whole counseling ministry.

Is that right? Well, I don't say that lightly. That's really true. Back in the 80s, that was academic suicide.

You wanted to be a member of the Evangelical Theological Society. This is your career. It was not something at that time that was discussed, wrote papers about in those kind of circles.

So what do you do? Well, you obey God, essentially. I was starting to see people come to freedom in Christ, and ministry was taken off, and you've heard my other story, that we went through a very broken experience, which led to our whole ministry. But I had a burden at that time to make this academically

credible, or you would never reach this kind of circles, and I'm not taking any credit for this.

There's all kinds of other people who contributed. Now you've got the Clinton Arnolds and the Scott Morales and others at schools that are very credible people, are trying to bring some balance and understanding, and to introduce this is the whole counsel of God. You know, I had to suffer little things on my own campus for that matter, of people coming up to me, colleagues, are you charismatic? Gee, I said, this isn't a charismatic issue.

It's a Christian issue. And people want to peg you or put you in a, are you one of them? I said, well, even if I was, one of them is one of us, for crying out loud. It's just the other leg and the same foot.

You know, people say, well, I can't peg you. I said, try Christian. And I knew at that time, I said, you know, that to go into our culture, our society, our church, and our Western world, deeply steeped in Western rationalism and naturalism, and to help change a little bit of the thinking in terms of their worldview, as well as who they really are in Christ, you better have some credentials, folks, and something to back you up, namely the Lord himself.

But I realized that credibility is almost everything in terms of our ministry. And I went to him, and I'm a pragmatist, and he's an idealist, and every pragmatist, I think, needs an idealist, to hold him accountable, and co-authored a book with me, initially called Common Made Holy on Sanctification, later now republished under God's Power at Work in You, which was a great privilege for me, to be honest with you, because I so highly respect Robert Sosia. Well, so did everybody else on campus, so if he was with me, that was a nice little protection, you know, besides the Lord.

But I also knew at that time, our credibility didn't hinge upon our ability to win an argument or to convince other people of our perspectives. Our credibility really hinged upon the fact that we had to live what we professed. And that has been borne out to be so true in almost everything I have written, for instance, you know, case in point, Finding Hope Again, Dealing with Depression.

The number one cause for depression is the reaction to losses in our life. I wrote that book. I went through the worst year of losses in my life I've ever had.

Dave Park just released our youth edition of that, Stomping Out Depression, and lost his dad within about a month afterwards, and probably one of our closest friends in our ministry, Dan Roloff, which I would ask you to cry out in prayer for. You couldn't find a more innocent man than his wife, just a beautiful couple, and his cancer has been given up. He's hopeless right now.

And so Dave is walking through that experience of two very difficult losses in his life. So we kind of agreed that we would write another book on prosperity, see if we could experience that, and postpone the book on death and on dying for another 20 years. But it was... But learning years ago that it's really not so much, you know, about who you are that counts, and that's what you can't compromise.

You can't compromise your character. And I was given a call by Cal State Dominguez Hills. It was the chairman of their philosophy department who wanted to know if I would debate a man from the American Civil Liberties Union on school prayer.

I didn't have any great, strong convictions in school prayer, and told him that. I said, but I would loan at least the freedom to pray, you know, which I think the Constitution affords us. He said, that's enough difference.

And so I agreed to do it. I told my wife, and she said, you'd have to be a fool to do that. I mean, these guys, you're not a debater.

These guys are professionals. She wouldn't even go and witness the carnage. And she said, I'll just stay home and pray.

I said, okay, you know. And so I said, but I'm not going there to win the argument. I'm going there because God has given me a public platform to share the love of Christ.

That's what I'm going there for. And so I go to this Cal State Dominguez Hills, and I did pray. I could have, a lot, actually.

And so the guy that I was supposed to debate, I found out was president of the Orange County Atheistic Society. So his name was Dr. Goldberg. So I went, Dr. Goldberg, are you Jewish? No.

Goldberg? He said, I never fraternized with the enemy before a debate. I said, the enemy? I said, how am I your enemy? And he walked away. And so anyway, here was the platform.

The place was really pretty full. And a big old auditorium. And they always have a plant sitting right down in front of you.

And I even waved at him. How you doing down there, you know? Because I knew when it opened it up, you know, he would be there to, you know, needle me and that kind of thing. What I didn't know and hadn't prepared for, actually, was that Campus Crusade for Christ decided to reschedule the meeting.

And I had 75 little warriors out there, which was kind of fun. But I got 15 minutes, he 15, five, five, and then opened it up. And what I wanted to have happen actually happened.

His character revealed itself. He got angry and everything, you know. And I said the real issue on those kind of problems is can you maintain your composure in Christ? If you can't minister in the power of the Holy Spirit, if the fruit of the Spirit isn't evident in what you're doing, don't do it.

It's like saying, well, you know, I'm just going to discipline my kids whether it's in the flesh or in the Lord. I said don't do it. You're better off not disciplining your kids if you can't do it without violating the fruit of the Spirit.

We never have a right to do that. And that's the pressure is to, you know, and frankly it's just character. And after a while I could just see that the chairman of the philosophy department, I don't think he was a believer, but if he wanted to identify with anybody, it wasn't that guy over there.

And so when it was all over with, you know, he just left. And there was a little luncheon and people came out and talked with me. It was really interesting.

But a number of the crew said, that was great. You just kept smiling up there, you know. But, you know, a lot of this comes back to just our own commitment that nobody has a right to determine who you are.

And God's goal is that you conform to His image. And I've come to understand deeply what it really means to be a child of God. And only God has a right to determine who I am and not give that over to anybody else.

And under pressure, when criticisms come and whatever else, whatever you do, you can't compromise who you are. You've got to be the person that God created you to be. Which brings back, I think, a very important basic issue that Paul says the goal of our instruction is love.

It's not knowledge that puffeth up. It's love that edifies. And I honestly believe the number one problem in Christian education today is it has the wrong goal.

You make knowledge an end in itself and you distort the very purpose for which it was intended. You can end up to be a noisy gong and clanging cymbal if you have no love. You can do all things.

But that's not the goal. You know, it's a tragic thing to me. And part of the reason that Dr. Soce and I wanted to write a book on sanctification is that we saw seminary students come to seminary, excited about the Lord, and leave almost depressed.

You know, after so many years of study, somehow that truth should be entering into our heart and transforming our character. The Bible's really clear, isn't it? You'll know my disciples for their love. By this you'll know them because of the fruit that they bear.

I remember one of my former students came to me and he showed me a passage. He said, you know, this is just the same old thing that's happening to you. And he pointed to a passage in one of the Gospels where the Lord healed this man on the Sabbath.

Now, you know, if people there had a love for God and a love for people, which is, you know, the great commandment, isn't it? Wouldn't everybody say, thank you. What an incredible act of love and grace to restore that man's hand. Is that how they responded? No, they went out and turned him in because he violated the Sabbath.

You know, they found some picky little thing in their doctrine that violated, you know, their thinking and somehow or another had to go after him for that. They were actually even theologically wrong, weren't they? And so people will find one little glitch and hang on that. And so how do you respond to that? You, you know, you love.

And you conform to God's image. And the whole process of that, why should we be surprised at it? It happened to the Lord and he lived a perfect life. Well, I'll live a perfect life and I'll never have any criticism.

Will that work? Well, the Lord lived a perfect life and He crucified him. And so, I mean, you know, to have some assumption in this thing that I'll be so careful. I don't know how I could have been more careful.

Honestly, looking back at my life, I don't know how I could have been. I had, I think, one of the most gracious, godly theologians to hold me accountable, not just for morals, folks, message. And I just did everything I could.

That won't be enough. I mean, there won't be enough. And it's just part of the world that we're living in is part of the opposition.

We, you can't build the kingdom of God in a vacuum. It's in the context of the fact that there is a God of this world, there is a prince of power of the air, and He's deceived the whole world, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. In the midst of that, if you think that you can have a ministry and have no opposition to it, you probably aren't doing much.

Won't you if all men speak well of you? And so that's just caused a lot of people to just get timid and say, I'm not going to advance it then, and then I won't have any opposition. But you won't bear any fruit. You know, all the fruit, beloved, is at the end of the limb.

Hang on to the trunk if you want to, but it's all out in the edge of the limb. And, you know, if you're looking for just, you know, everybody to love you in this lifetime and hang on to the trunk, I said, you won't bear much fruit. Well, I don't give you the opposition to my ministry.

I said, what are you doing? Anyway, it's a couple of pitfalls. I've put four words in here. I came across this article in the Harvard Business Review several years ago.

It was written by a psychologist. It's a secular article. And what he does is he deals with failed executives, people who had burned out at the end of their careers.

And he said there were four things true about every one of them. They all became more and more authoritarian, more and more autonomous, more and more arrogant, and they all committed adultery. I can't name any names here, but I have seen that happen in our Christian circles so many times, it's painful.

I was sitting with a denominational executive, and I said, I'm concerned about my brother. I just read this article, and I said, I've seen all three of these. I've seen him become more and more authoritarian and autonomous and arrogant, and sure enough, lost a huge ministry for adultery.

I remember sitting out in the Portland area, and an incredibly well-known, successful pastor had been accused by 17 men of having sex. And the board was stymied. You know, they took the position that these are all one witness to an event against his word, one word against theirs.

The Christian community didn't buy it. They said, no, you've got 17 witnesses. And so it kind of fractured the Christian community.

It was really a tragic event. And my heart was, even if he was guilty, if he came to me, I would help restore him. I mean, that's where my heart lies, and so I was not to get anybody.

But I was speaking at this camp, and it turned out his elders at the church were there, and we got to talking about it, and basically they were somewhat defending him. And I said, I don't know him. I've never met the man.

I would hope the best for him. I hope it's not true. You know, that would be, and if it was, I would do what I could to help him.

I said, but, so I went to this thing. I said, you tell me. I don't know.

I said, and so I went to each one, and the chairman looked at me, and I said, they become more and more autonomous. They become more and more authoritarian. And more and more arrogant.

And they all committed adultery. Well, we haven't proven that one. Well, I think they had, actually.

But, you know, the tragedy of that is, how could somebody be a Christian leader and be known as arrogant, autonomous, with overbearing authoritarianism? Are those Christian issues? How does that match servant leadership? I mean, so the whole pursuit is wrong. Somehow you pull away. I've said, if you

want to get into spiritual trouble, get isolated.

Get by yourself. Don't answer to anybody. You will be in trouble before long.

I want to give you four other words here. They're all A's too. Put them in order.

On the top, put authority. Under authority, put accountability. Under accountability, affirmation.

And under that one, acceptance. Authority, accountability, affirmation, acceptance. Now, you would all agree with me, I'm sure, that if there's ever an age where we need to be accountable to one another, it's today, isn't it? From which end of that list, however, has God come to you and I? I'll tell you, how you answer that question will probably say about as much as I can share with you how you understand parenting and ministry.

There's no question in my mind, folks. While I was yet a sinner, Christ died for me. It all began with unconditional love and acceptance from God.

And then came the affirmation, Beloved, now you are a child of God. Here's what I've observed. If the authority figure demands accountability, without affirmation and acceptance, you'll never get it.

Or they may fill out a form, answer a few superficial questions, but you'll never get it. What I've discovered, however, is that if somebody knows that they're loved and affirmed, they will voluntarily be accountable to the authority figure. Voluntarily.

You can see that in parenting. You can have a child come home late and say, Where were you? Out? What were you doing? Tell me, folks. Nothing.

And see, we don't realize at that stage that you're not going to share with somebody like that. And people don't, by and large. And that's what you have to love about the Lord, is that the sinners love to be around Jesus.

This man spoke to one who had authority, he said at the Sermon on the Mount. Well, he didn't have any authority. He wasn't a member of the Sanhedrin.

He wasn't part of the Roman government. He wasn't part of any hierarchy at all. What was his authority based on? It was all character.

What's the requirement for an elder of a church? It's all character, isn't it? There's where your credibility lands, right there. It's all character. I think, honestly, we were given an object lesson in this world a few years ago that we dare not miss, actually.

I was down in Bogota, Colombia, and I was watching CNN one night, got back to my hotel, and that Princess Diana had died. And a week later, well, within a week, actually, Mother Teresa had died. Now, I think you would arguably agree with me that at the end of the last century, those were the two most well-known ladies in this world.

You couldn't find two people more different, could you? One was very pretty. The other one really wasn't. One was very rich, and the other one had taken a vow of poverty.

Both claimed royalty, one in an earthly kingdom, one in a spiritual kingdom. We could sit here and debate the theology of one of them and the morality of the other, miss the whole point, folks. The whole world rolls up and acknowledges them for really the same reason.

They perceived that they cared. Isn't that true? Wouldn't that be great if they could say that of us? Behold how they love one another. I honestly think the greatest apologetic for our faith is that right there, is our ability to love, which is God's goal for our lives.

That's our instruction, is to be like Christ, and to look at Jesus and just to see how sinners love to be around him, and he waged war against the hypocrites. Today the Church is charged with being full of hypocrites and sinners. Stay away.

Now, that's not totally true, but there's enough truth there to bug us a little bit. Now, the question is, there are no perfect people here, and we're all on a journey and we're becoming like Christ as best as we can, but I remember--well, let's turn there. Turn in your Bibles to Proverbs 9. Proverbs 9, verse 7. Let me read it.

He who corrects a scoffer gets dishonor for himself. He who reproves a wicked man gets insults for himself. Do not reprove a scoffer or he will hate you.

Reprove a wise man and he will love you. Give instruction to a wise man and he will still be wiser. Teach a righteous man and he will increase his learning.

And you know what's interesting about that is, is that why would-- it just seems to be opposite, doesn't it? Isn't the scoffer the one that you should be reprovng? Why would you want to teach or reprove a wise man or a righteous man? The next verse probably is some clue here. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. I think what you're dealing with here really is an internal belief and an attitude that people have.

And when the reproofs and the rebukes of life come, and they come, they come for all of us, how do you respond to it? Are you a righteous man? Are you a wise man? If you're a wise person, you'll receive that reproof and become wiser and more righteous. That's the whole point of it is. And so it's kind of reverse logic in a way, but it's going to come.

It's just part of life. I said the best way to illustrate that is you're married, aren't you? I mean, other than the Holy Spirit, sometimes in place of the Holy Spirit, you know, that takes place in our marriages, obviously. Now, I had a real neat precursor to all of this.

Having been an aerospace engineer, I ended up to be a senior systems engineer on about a \$100 million fire control system, anti-submarine rocketry. And we were at the preliminary phase. Now, I was a systems engineer.

That was the person who did the upfront design. It's the black box design. When it come down to actual circuit design, that was out of the picture.

But I had to shepherd this project all the way through to our first production model. Well, you don't even get to the smaller design unless that first design thing is totally approved. And you have to go through a design approval to get there.

I don't care who you are, folks. That's a little intimidating. I can tell you a day when I went in and I put my design up all on a wall like that, and I had to.

I mean, this was not a--because the company's reputation was at stake. You know, not just mine, but the company's. And so they're not going to take the next step until we've gone through all the right hurdles so that we can guarantee that we've got a product that's done, that's going to work.

And so you invite all these Sharpies in, and they're there to find out anything they can that's wrong with your design. And you've got to explain this whole thing. Now, think about this for a moment.

Is that a good thing or a bad thing for you personally? It's a real good thing, actually. I mean, let's say they just--oh, okay, it's all right. And you went ahead with the whole process and the thing failed.

Wouldn't you fail with it? Sure you would, folks. Now, they're going to come in here, and they're going to find out what's wrong with that. Now, when you left that, truth of the matter is it's still your design.

But you've run it through a lot of people's grids, and all that can do is to ensure the fact that you've got a better design, a better process. I wish that was always true in our Christian circles, that we would pass our design before other people, ask for their feedback, receive their criticism. What I've observed even then, however, is that the inability for some people to separate issues from personalities.

I remember about four years ago, this was kind of one of those unique experiences of my life, was the Christian Publishers Association had their 25th annual meeting, and I was asked to be their devotional speaker. And the president of the organization--this is all Christian publishers-- asked me to present a paper on Christian ethics in publishing. I said, you don't have one? And they didn't.

They had no recognized ethics. So I really swept bullets over this thing. I wrote about a 12-page paper, and the first morning I was there, I got a chance to present that to all these Christian publishers.

And one of the issues was right there. I said, if we could teach our people to focus on issues and stay off personalities in writing, first of all, half the books on our shelves would drop off. But why is that so hard to follow through on that? I mean, why can't we just present the issues and assume there's intelligent people out there without attacking personalities and characters? I think it should be a standard in the industry.

My 12 pages ended up in two paragraphs for their ethical statement, but, you know, it was a start, and so I appreciate that. But I could tell that when I was sitting in there in my design review, whether they were pinging away at me or at my design. Neil, I don't understand why that feedback loop is there.

I think that's going to over-dampen the whole... Is that me or the design? That's the design. Well, that's a stupid thing you did there. That's me, isn't it? Isn't that interesting? Now, let's look at Christ for a moment.

You want to be angry and not sin? Then be angry at sin. He didn't turn over the money changers. He turned over the tables.

And there's a difference, folks, especially if you're on the receiving end of this thing. Aren't you glad that He was able to separate you from your sin? We would all be forever lost for that matter. What I'm really trying to get across here is that when criticism comes, the first question that you ask, is there any truth in this? You have to ask that question.

The person who will not receive that kind of feedback is doomed to fall and stumble badly someday. We need that kind of correction. We need it amongst ourselves.

We need to do that in love, to speak the truth in love. We need to confront one another in a loving kind of a way, for only one thing, because I'm concerned about your reputation, because I'm concerned, you know, where you're going. And even if you have to do church discipline, what's the purpose for it? To win a brother.

It's not to destroy him or discredit him. It's to win him. And so if somebody would go in private and sit down and say, gee, I'm a little concerned about what you're teaching here.

Can we talk about it? Sure. Some of you heard me, or seen some of my writings, I've always tried to buy the philosophy that you don't be defensive. My example, of course, is Christ, and we'll get to that in a moment or so.

And I think for two reasons. One, if you're wrong, you don't have a defense. That's not hard, actually.

That's just part of life. If you're right, you don't need one. That's the hard one.

When people start pinging away at you. You know, in Scripture, we're told that we are to discipline as a proof of our love. But we're commanded not to judge.

What's the difference? Well, discipline is always related to behavior. If you're going to discipline something, it has to be on something that you've observed. I heard you say it.

I saw you do it, etc. Where judgment is always related to character. That's what you're not to judge in another person, character.

And I think that's consistent throughout the Bible. And that applies again to parenting in a very special way. If you catch your son telling a lie, Carl, what you said right now isn't true.

You're judging me. Am I judging him? No, there's no judgment there at all. It's an observation.

I just pointed out what you said isn't true. And see, if it's a behavior issue, then he can say, Oh, you're right. I shouldn't have done that.

It's over with, folks. But what if I said, You're a liar. That's character, isn't it? How can I respond to that? The tendency will want to be defensive.

I mean, that's your natural, your flesh responds every time. You want to, you know, I'm not a liar, you know. So, what we do in the name of discipline sometimes is nothing more than character assassination.

Stupid, dumb, clumsy, ugly, whatever. Questioning motives and everything else. I said, there's no way that person can respond to that.

I can change my behavior just by making a choice. I can't instantly change my character. It's not even subtle.

It's a very overt form of rejection. You know, you fell short, and I've rejected you right now. And I don't care who you are.

That hurts. I said, when that happens, should we be defensive? And my answer is, no. Easy? No.

It takes the grace of God, for that matter. Actually, I think in the long run, it's easier, however. Because if you keep defending yourself, it's an interesting issue.

Some of you have probably heard me tell this story, but it's for the sake of all of us getting on the same page. When I was young in the ministry, this gal came to me. I'd inherited a youth program.

And I was a college pastor of a large church at the time, and I inherited about 250 kids. And I had a girls program that, it was under my oversight, supposedly, but I knew the director of it. I thought we were friends, and if it's not broke, don't fix it.

So I left it alone. Well, in hindsight, that was a mistake. I should have called her and asked how she was doing.

And it wasn't doing well. She was really kind of failing in her responsibility. And actually, she was an administrative post, and she wasn't an administrator.

Simple as that, really. Just misplaced. But she wasn't doing well, and she needed a scapegoat, and she thought that's what pastors were for.

And so she came in and made an appointment with me. Almost ripped off the doorknob in the way coming in. And she said, Pastor Neal, I made a list last night of things for you and things against you.

Boy, I looked at that piece of paper, and there was a line drawn in the middle, and the four column had one dinky item, and the against went all the way down the page, and down at the bottom it said, Over. And I said, Well, give me the four first. And she did, and then she went through that list.

Now, the part of me that's made of earth wanted to respond to every one of those allegations, folks. But the part of me that's made of God said, Keep your mouth shut. And so I did.

She got the end of her list. Now, that's a magic moment, folks, because there's always an awkward silence then, isn't it? In like two, three years. And I said, finally, I said, You know, Gene, it must have taken a lot of courage for you to come in and share that with me.

What do you suggest I do? That isn't your fault. It's mine. Right.

I didn't say that, by the way. I may have thought it, but I didn't say it, you know. Now, see, what would have happened if I would have intended to have, to defend myself in any one of those points? Well, she would have been even more convinced that it was her great role in life to convince me that I was not a member of the Trinity yet.

I had not yet qualified. And something that I already knew, being married. But, I share that story with you because what I have learned over the years is that, is that nobody shoots down, not Christians, not brothers and sisters, shoots down another believer out of a position of strength.

They don't do it. They're hurting people for some reason. And if you can not be defensive, there's a chance that you may turn around and have an opportunity for ministry.

In that case, I did. And, we actually sat and talked for quite a while. And, two weeks later, she resigned from that position.

Everybody was happy. But, these are not healthy people doing this. Do you understand what I'm saying? If you know that, it makes it a little easier when you come under that kind of an attack.

I mean, you don't hear Chuck Swindoll getting on his radio bad-mouthing other ministries. You just don't hear godly, mature people doing that. There's something wrong here to begin with.

That's not what God has called us to do. They're out of God's will somehow or another. And they're just expressing their own bitterness somehow.

And you just happen to be in the way. And, it'll be somebody else that'll come along. So, you know, if it isn't just you and this one person after another they're attacking, you know good and well that there's something wrong there, folks.

And if you know that in your mind, it's a little easier to accept it. And I think that in the process like this, because I don't care what you write, some member of the community is not going to agree with that. I don't care how perfect you write.

It just is not going to happen. We don't have perfect agreement here. And, that doesn't stop us from loving each other or respecting each other's perspectives and viewpoints.

I mean, it shouldn't. I've learned a long time ago. I said, when you get two Baptists, you're going to have at least three opinions.

I mean, so, it's, but how do you receive that? Look at Psalm 119. Turn back to Psalm 119. Psalm 119, verse 51.

Psalm 119 is this great, great Old Testament chapter on, on the Word of God, essentially. Verse 51 says, The arrogant utterly deride me, yet I do not turn aside from your law. Verse 69, The arrogant have forged a lie against me.

With all my heart, I will observe your precepts. Verse 71, It is good, boy, that's tough. It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn your statutes.

Most of you, I'm sure, are aware of the, some of the primary critics of my ministry. One of them had put out a paper against me that was, I thought, was so blatantly wrong. I said, like, who in the world are you talking about? But what I did initially on that one was, I just sent it to 25 churches that I had conferences in.

I said, if any of this is true, I said, I need to repent. In my observation, it isn't, but I may be coming across in a way that I'm not aware of myself. And so, I would really appreciate a letter back from you if that's your perception, if there's some things that you have concerns about.

I mean, there's the people now who really know me, and they've been through our conferences, etc. On the other hand, if you'd agree with me that this isn't an accurate thing, would you kindly write this person so he doesn't do more damage to himself and his own ministry, and as well as mine? Well, I got no letters back. He got 25.

And, now, you would think, for an average person, I mean, that would just, that would kill me. I mean, if I thought one of my staff was publicly criticizing another ministry without going to him, I would dismiss him, to be honest with you. But you would think that that would be enough.

No. Just double their efforts. And, so, what do you do about those kind of things? Well, what I told my staff was, at the time, I said, there's only one way we can respond to this thing, and that's to say, do what we need to do to purify our message.

Is there a better way that we can say it so people don't misunderstand us? I was asked this morning, before we came here, I said, in rewriting Victor Woodcockerson's *Bondage Breaker*, you know, what promoted that, and was it because of the critics? And I responded to it, and I said, no, not really. I said, actually, I hadn't looked at them in 10 years. And, when I did, it was like, whew, I have grown.

Mostly in writing. I mean, those are the first two books I ever wrote. so, are they better books? Sure, they're better books.

They're better written. They're, my case, for what I believe, is stated better. Did it change much? No, not really.

But, over the years, you know, I've done doctoral ministry classes in seven different seminaries, so you've had a chance to have your message shown with a lot of people who've got good degrees, and you get a lot of feedback, and sometimes you just learn how to share it better. One of the things that I'm concerned about here, especially for the kind of ministry that some of you are considering or doing, for that matter, was that, looking back at my own life, having my engineering experience, there was no way that my company was going to put a product out there that wasn't tested, hadn't gone through all kinds of design reviews. There was no way.

You couldn't sell it, a product like that. I had that built into my thinking long before I ever went into ministry. And, for what it's worth, what I was, what God was developing in me, was starting way back, you know, leaving a church with the burden in my heart that I had people who had problems I didn't have answers for, and that bothered me.

And, I went to Talbot and started to teach, and I was there for my own edification trying to learn how. And, it was a learning process that I went through, and, but I didn't go public. I didn't even want to go public with what I was learning for about five or six years.

That's, that's gospel truth. I mean, the Staffs of Freedom were developed in about 83. I didn't even use them publicly until about 88 or 89.

And, I was working out the kinks and the bugs myself, and, etc., and, on campus. And, then I felt God saying, okay, it's time to go. But, but the concern that I have is that underlying what you see.

I mean, something like, a tool like the Staffs of Freedom, folks, it's just a tool. It'll be gone in the next generation. What I'm actually concerned about more is the rationale and the thinking that is behind it.

You need to develop a tool to express that. But, they're tools. I mean, the Fourth Spiritual Law is just a tool.

But, the idea of repentance and faith has always been here. And, so, you know, sometimes you give people a tool and they don't know the whole underlying rationale behind it. And, then, frankly, it gets misused.

And, and we struggle with that so much as to even make that available as a tool, because plenty of people just pick it up and use it as a tool and think it's some kind of magic thing. Well, I went through the Staffs and nothing happened. Well, you know, tools don't set you free.

Christ sets you free. And, what sets you free is repentance and faith in God. You know, that's just a tool.

And, to my surprise, through the bookstore, we sold 250,000 copies of that. I said, who's using that stuff out there? I mean, apparently somebody is. But, we decided to take a risk in saying, okay, you know, make it more available to others.

And, that was some time ago. But, what my concern is here is passing on a tool to people who aren't that grounded, aren't that prepared, don't know how to stand themselves, wouldn't know how to deal with tough cases. And so, we try to advocate as best training as you can possibly get.

And, everybody here needs to work at developing a very broad, systematic theology of some kind. We all have to do that, folks. So, you don't end up having your favorite verses and your favorite answers to questions.

I mean, one guy told me one day, oh, face it, you know, God gives you words of knowledge. Well, I said, that may be true, but you don't build a theology or a practice out of half a verse in 1 Corinthians 12. And, unfortunately, people do that.

You know, they'll find one verse and then build a whole thing out of something like that without having a good foundation laid. And, I can't overstate how important that is. And, if you've got a new thing that seems to be working, I say, well, run it before some good people.

Let them ask the hard questions. And, make sure they're not just yass people, but would love you enough to ask the hard questions, and then field test it for a while before you put it out as a public issue. Shouldn't we all do that? I had to do that as an engineer for a stupid underwater fire control system.

Don't you think we should do that when people's lives are at stake? I say, one of my greatest concerns in our culture today is that to teach a public school, to help people to live for the next 40 years, you've got to have a master's degree and go through a steep program. To teach Sunday school, all you've got to do is raise your hand. I'll volunteer.

No! Not him! That's why the Lord had no volunteers. He stayed all night and prayed, folks, and he still chose one that wasn't good. Anyway, it was, you know, when these pressures come like this, and you start to read a letter, and there's poison, folks, it's just like a curse to you.

I said, sense the spirit of it and stop reading it. Don't even pay attention to it. You know, the whole motive behind this thing is all wrong.

Well, when sending out those letters didn't work, people who were endorsing me were starting to get under criticism. Well, that's bogus, folks. I mean, you know, I got a letter from K. Arthur and Swindoll and others like that.

What's going on? And that was a little different issue. It wasn't just myself right now. By the way, I had some interesting precursors to this.

I remember back when I was a college pastor, first minister I had in the church, two gals came to my house one night and said, we can't trust you anymore. I said, why's that? You don't keep confidentialities. I said, do you have a case in point? Well, they started to share one, and it wasn't me.

I know that, I think I knew at that time where that information was coming from. It was another staff person. It wasn't me.

And I struggled with that, you know, do I just go and defend myself and expose this guy or whatever, you know, or do I, and I was just thinking, God, I gotta be faithful here, do I want to, would you allow the whole ministry to go because of one disruptive person like that? Well, I'll tell you what, God just told me to keep my mouth shut for a year. And it was tough. I had college students sitting out there, about a third of them were seemingly against me.

But a year later, God exposed that person. I mean, it wasn't funny, I mean, I felt sorry for her, but it really exposed her. And the net result over the period of time was just the opposite effect happened.

It gained far more acceptance. And sometimes you get pushed under fire. I was in Lincoln, Nebraska, and an interesting character down there called me the most dangerous man in America and sent his lawyer after me in the church, a nice Berean church down there that Doug Shadow was at.

They called the pastors together, too, and said, would I be there for question and answer? Sure. Well, I've never been in some public attack like that in my life. And I just tried as best I could to answer the questions.

And finally, I said, you know, there's a lot of pastors here. I said, I think I found a way that I There's a lot of fruit. I said, if you find a way that's better than that, I said, I'll jump all over, brother.

But until then, I'm going to use what I think God has given me. But at that stage of the game, I must have had three pastors come up. Boy, I learned a lot what you said, but I'd have fallen apart.

I said, I wanted to. I felt like my flesh was falling all over the place. I said, but God gave me the grace to just stay in there and listen to the issues and questions and keep responding.

John Stott said, you cannot pander to a man's intellectual arrogance, but you must cater to their intellectual integrity. And that's a good issue to me. I said, if there's a pastor who's coming, he wants to protect his flock, make sure the truth comes in and he's concerned about what he's being taught, and that's his attitude, I'll sit up all night with him.

But if I've got to come to a person shooting at you with a bitter spirit, I said, no. You want to fight? Go out and start without me. Be out there five minutes.

I'm not a fighter, folks. Never have been. I'm a lover.

I may appear that way, but I'm really not. I'm not, you know, but you can't intimidate me. Nobody's going to determine who I am but God.

God has given us the ministry of reconciliation, you know, be an ambassador for Christ's sake, how many books have you seen on that? And so I was researching for it, I've really come to find out that the ministry of reconciliation is extremely rare. We have conciliation, and we have conflict management, and that's not reconciliation. Reconciliation is something that we do first with God, be reconciled to God.

And actually, if you're doing this kind of ministry, we're trying to expose to you here in this conference, is that that's what you're doing. I've sat and had the privilege to see people reconciled with God, get rid of their pride, get rid of their anger, and their bitterness, and forgive, and whatever else, and connect, man. Folks, we're reconciled with God.

Now, truth of the matter is that doesn't automatically say that I'm going to be reconciled with everybody else around me. And one of the interesting aspects, I was actually a Catholic theologian that got my attention most, and he was really dealing with social reconciliation and abuse and that kind of stuff, but he was really one who kind of, I think, kind of nailed it. He said, you really can't do reconciliation until you have first fully identified with the death of Christ.

And I think that's true, actually, and who came to my mind immediately was Corrie Tenbo, going around Germany and preaching repentance and forgiveness after World War II. And why was she so effective? Can you think of anybody who's identified more with the death of Christ than Corrie Tenbo? I started the book with an experience we had as a ministry a few years ago. I was asked if I would go over to Liberia, Africa, and they said, they're throwing their hands in the air.

We can't solve our problems politically, and somehow we need the church. I mean, I've never heard of this happening before, and I would have gone in a heartbeat. But Joe and Kathy Wasman, who's our new president, had been a missionary in Africa, and I said the amount of time, the contextualization that we needed, I said he was much more, and they went over there.

But what spearheaded all this was a young gal named Christine Norman. Her father at one time was the president of Liberia, and she saw her father and her brother killed right in front of her. And her mom and her family were put in a house arrest, and they escaped out of the country.

Now she's gone back there. She's preaching repentance and faith in God, forgiveness. Why could she do that? Because she identified with the death of Christ and the resurrection.

And he said the person who is the abuser can never be the reconciler. The only thing that they can orchestrate or initiate is their own repentance. It's only the abused that can initiate the ministry of reconciliation.

Isn't that interesting? I mean, it was kind of a fascinating concept. But reconciliation cannot happen even if the abused will not forgive. It can't happen.

I mean, we all know that that has to happen if you want to be right with God, for that matter. But if that happens, can they be reconciled to another person who won't repent? No. Actually, I think you can make a case for the fact that we're all forgiven.

Christ died once for all. So on the whole reconciliation, the enmity that existed between ourself and God from God's side has been totally solved. And that's why our ministry is reconciliation.

So we may be all forgiven by God, but we're not all reconciled to Him, which I believe would require repentance and faith in God, because Christ has died once for all. And whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved. Well, anyway, the tough issues on these things is praying for those who hate you.

Pray, love your enemies. It takes the grace of God to do that, doesn't it, folks? The love of God. Agape is different from phileo for a very simple reason.

Phileo brotherly love is something the natural man can experience, but agape is something that God has given to us because agape love is not dependent upon its object. God loves us not because we're lovable, but because God is love. And that's why it's a new commandment to love somebody that's actually unlovable.

It takes the grace of God to do that, and how He actually tells us to do that is that do good to those who hate you, to bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you. And I think there's an order there. If somebody comes along and just doesn't like you, you know what I mean, it's a, what do you do? Well, respond kindly to them.

I mean, be good. Do good things to them. But if the next step comes along and they're bad-mouthing you, I mean, they're cursing you, just trying to do good deeds won't work, folks.

I've kind of discovered that even in practice. I said, what do you do at that time? Well, here's the grace of God. Bless those who curse you.

Bless. Do you know what bless means? We get a word eulogy from it. It essentially means speak well of those who curse you.

Do you think now you need the grace of God to do this? What if that doesn't work? What if they're actually now mistreating you? Then pray for them. And so people ask, how are we responding to this? I said, we pray for them. For God to bring judgment on? No.

Pray to God, bless them. Easy? No. But it's the grace of God.

And, you know, one of the most misused verses in all the Bible, I think, is that God is looking throughout the earth to find somebody who will stand in the gap. Why did He want somebody to stand in the gap? Because He was going to bring judgment upon this country, and He was looking for somebody who would pray that judgment would not come. And so rather than praying judgment on somebody, praying that God would withhold His judgment, give them an opportunity to repent, come to the Lord.

Finally, there may come a time when the church community simply has to reject a factious man. Now, a factious man, or a heretic, is somebody, literally, who causes schisms. This may be the most painful thing for me.

I believe there's only one ultimate basis for our unity, which we're told to be diligent to preserve. And if we're diligent to preserve, then there must be something that's already there. And I think that if you can get a people, a group of people, red and yellow, black and white, full in love with God, united with Him, you'll all be reconciled.

The unity is the fact that you have Christ in you, the hope of glory. I'd like to think, personally, that helping people get radically right with God is helping contribute you to what the Lord is praying for, that we would

all be one. We will never always perfectly agree with each other, that's not necessary.

The oneness exists because of the fact that we're brothers and sisters in Christ. We're all filled with the same Spirit, reading the same Bible, praying to the same God. I said, you may be driving your own little car, folks, but it's in the same kingdom getting this gas from the same station.

And that diversity doesn't bother me more. In fact, I kind of like the diversity in the body of Christ, because we've got a diverse culture and that's what it's going to take to reach it. So that doesn't, you know, uniformity is not what we're looking for.

But a consensus of the fact that there's neither Jew nor Gentile, barbarian or Cistern, Bosman or Freeman, that there's no cultural or social barriers, that we have an all-inclusive God, that it shouldn't upset us to use inclusive language then either, for that matter, where it's appropriate. But that's the basis for the body of Christ coming together, and you've got people going around sowing discord, dividing the body of Christ. It's really a sad thing to me.

And a double sad when you think that God has given you something and gone through all the pain to get there, that it's helping people, and now the people are being kept away from it by so-called zealots. You ever wonder why God doesn't come back? Why do you put up with this, Lord? I mean, Swindoll says the church is like Noah's Ark. He said, you couldn't stand the stink inside if it wasn't for the storm outside.

And that question was answered to me in a powerful way after the horrible riots in L.A. that we lived through when I was still out there. I spoke to the inner city, a group of black pastors afterwards, and a guy got up to introduce me. He was an old retired black pastor.

He asked that question. Good timing, too. I mean, why in the world doesn't God come back? Why does He put up with this? He said, you know, 50 years ago, He looked into the kingdom of darkness, and He saw me.

If He had come back at that time, I would have been locked off for all of eternity, and everybody here has some brother, some sister, some mother, some father, a co-worker that doesn't know the Lord, and you want to come back now? Then you'd be locked off for all of eternity. God's not slow about His promise. One day is a thousand years to Him, but He's waiting for the gospel to go out to the ends of the earth.

Then the end will come. Meanwhile, be the person God created you to be. Nobody else has a right to determine that, right? Let's pray.

Father, we do love You. We thank You for the Word of God, lamp unto our feet. Thank You for the presence that You have in our life, that Your Spirit is bear witness with our spirit that we're children of God.

Lord, I pray that people will leave here that saying, we need to have integrity. We need to have accountability. We need to be morally pure.

We need to be balanced. We need to be a part of the answer, not part of the problem. We just want to commit ourselves to that now in Jesus' name, amen.

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