

CRITICISM

Al Brown

Surely, the greatest challenge facing every person who obeys the gospel is that he “grow up in all things into him, who is the head, even Christ” (Eph. 4:15). He is to grow in faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God until he becomes a full-grown (mature) man, and the divine ideal by which such maturity is measured is the “stature of the fulness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).

To grow “to the measure of the stature of Christ” refers to what Peter called being a “partaker of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4). “The fulness of Christ,” has reference to those character traits of Jesus such as faith, love, courage, meekness, righteousness, self control, *et cetera*. Doubtless, everyone could find room for improvement in any of these traits.

There is one quality, however, which especially seems to be in short supply today—among brethren as well as the people of the world. It is the ability to stand for that which is right and good and true regardless of the criticism directed against them. No one likes to be criticized. It is only natural to want to avoid as much of it as possible, but fidelity to God demands that we stand for the right even when it brings on us the same harsh outbursts Jesus Himself endured in similar situations (cf. Mat. 12:9-14).

It sometimes seems that almost everything Jesus taught was unpopular. The principles on which He stood, and the purpose for which He gave His life, were out of favor with so many of the people and almost all their leaders, so their animosity was stirred and their criticism was bitter and constant. It would have been so much easier for Jesus if He had not been so adamantly opposed to the lawlessness which saturated society at every level. The pressure was great—to go along with the crowd—to allow Himself to become a “bread” Messiah—to cater to the whims of the rich and powerful.

The reason so much of Jesus’ teaching was negative was because so much that men believed and practiced was wrong. He knew, even if many of His professed followers today do not, that compromising with, or glossing over, the sinfulness of men would not reconcile them to God. Their false ways and beliefs had to be corrected and forgiven, or their destiny was eternal wrath. Even though it was unpleasant and brought on Him their criticism, scorn and hatred, He loved men too much to let them die in their sin and rebellion without telling them the truth (John 3:17-21).

All true followers of Christ practice this trait (John 15:18-24; 16:1-4; 1 Pet. 2:19-23; 4:4,12-16). Indeed, pleasing God requires His people to try to correct what is wrong and to meekly take unwarranted criticism. We are to be impervious to the negative things others say about us if our doctrine and conduct are acceptable to God. We must submit to the will of God, and this includes being faithful in areas deemed socially unacceptable by worldly men. God did not reveal His will to men so that we could just sit back and read its contents and admire its beauty. Christians are to preach and practice the truth even if it means standing alone. Part of the fruit of faithfulness is ostracism by the ungodly.

Christians need to remember that people who criticize God's revealed will and those who disobey Him are not the spiritually mature people they often so vociferously claim to be. Actually, they are spiritually retarded. Instead of treasuring the things which are really worthwhile and lasting, their first love is obviously for worldly things and the praise worldly men can heap on them (1 John 2:15-17).

Such people, in or out of the church, do not rely on God's wisdom which is disclosed in scripture, but on the vain and flawed wisdom of men. One of the most vital signs by which their claim to spiritual maturity is undermined is their abysmal failure to follow the example of Jesus or to live by His teaching. This explains why those who are considered "great" (by themselves and others who are as spiritually inept as they are) will at times do and say unethical and immoral things. Yet, when their sin is brought to their attention, their faith in God's word is seen to be all but non-existent, for they try to cover it up or explain it away instead of repenting and asking forgiveness.

It is not surprising, then, that such people harshly nit pick the teaching of Christ and His apostles. The pressures on Jesus were tremendous to go along with the crowd, comply with the popular concept of what the Messiah would be, and to submit to the "traditions of the elders" and the demands of the Jewish leaders. His unswerving hostility to every kind of false teaching, and His demand that men believe and obey His Father's will brought on Him nothing but trouble and criticism and finally death.

Today, faithfulness brings identical results. For instance, it is common for the ungodly to hypocritically denounce name-calling (which is acceptable if done correctly) while they hurl derogatory abuse at God's faithful (which is a sin at any time). We should respond as the apostle did: "With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment; yea, I judge not mine own self. For I know nothing against myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord" (1 Cor. 4:3,4).

A spiritually mature person knows he will be criticized if he stands up and is counted on the side of right and justice and fairness. All those who are unwilling to take such abuse will be enslaved to the whims and opinions of anyone who chooses to criticize them.

WHERE DO YOU STAND?