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## OVERCOMING CRITICISM AND NEGATIVISM *Dave Gallagher*

Experiencing criticism just seems to be a fact of life. Perhaps one of the reasons criticism and negativism are so prevalent today is that we live in a sort of “in-your-face” society. That seems especially true as we work with volunteers. Because they’re donating their time and energy, volunteers seem to feel even more free to “speak their mind.”

Like it or not, criticism and negativism simply are a part of ministering with people. Faced with that reality, I’ve learned a few lessons that may prove helpful to you as you work with volunteers.

One of the things I’ve learned is that Christ really is the one I’m serving. I’ve been learning to look at the bigger picture. I remind myself that it’s Christ’s church, not mine. That means I’m obligated to seriously consider any criticism I receive because it isn’t about me, it’s about my service to Christ.

When we’re faced with criticism, we all have two choices. One choice is to *react*, and the other is to *respond*. If I react, I find myself lashing out, feeling hurt, or wallowing in self-pity. That’s not good for anyone. On the other hand, if I respond, I find myself relaxing instead of tightening up and I’m able to let the Holy Spirit work in my life.

If I’m criticized for something I’ve said or done, I try to see if there’s any truth in the criticism. If I find that I’m in the wrong, it’s really important that I accept the criticism graciously and ask for forgiveness. If I’m wrong, I simply don’t have a defense. Attempting to rationalize or defend myself is counterproductive and I’ll quickly lose my self-respect, as well as the respect of the volunteers I’m ministering with. My response needs to be, “You’re right. I was wrong. Will you forgive me, please?”

But what if I believe that I’m right? In that case I can explain my reasoning, but I need to be sure that I’m not defending myself. If I’m defensive I could create more problems and prolong the situation. In that case I would only create more hurt and fractured relationships.

I’ve come up with a series of questions to help me deal with tough situations. Perhaps they’ll help with your tough situations:

- What’s my motivation to forgive the one who criticized or rejected me?
- Why is it so difficult for me to forgive those who have hurt me?
- What do I usually do when I’m rejected or criticized by someone who’s very important to me?
- Once I’ve responded appropriately to criticism, I need to get past it. Why is it difficult for me to let go of criticism?
- What criticism or negativism am I still holding onto? What will it take for me to let go of it? When will I release this burden?

My responses to these questions will determine if the criticism and rejection will contribute to or deter me from my spiritual growth. The words of Paul in Colossians 3:13-14 remind me of the attitude I really should have as I deal with criticism and negativism in my work with volunteers: “You must make allowance for each other’s faults and forgive the person who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. And the most important piece of clothing you must wear is love. Love is what binds us all together in perfect harmony” (NLT). Additionally, Proverbs 15:1 is a good reminder: “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”

We each have different ways of responding to criticism and negativism. When someone criticizes you or your work, what do you do? Is your first response, *I blow up* or perhaps *I quietly count to 10 and hold it in*? Neither has worked for me. Instead I try to deal directly in a constructive way with the source of the criticism. (One of the worst things I can do is to take my frustrations out on someone else!) Sulking, blaming, making excuses, or expressing sarcasm just isn’t God’s plan for his people. I’m the leader, and it’s important that I model Christ’s example in my life.

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