

Why I Don't Get Into Mudslinging Battles With Destructive Critics

Constructive criticism is life-giving and life-saving, and all of us should have ears to hear truthful words of correction, exhortation, reproof and rebuke. As the psalmist said, "Let a righteous man strike me—that is a kindness; let him rebuke me—that is oil on my head. My head will not refuse it" (Ps. 141:5a, NIV).

But destructive criticism kills. It tears down without building up. It is loveless and unkind. It uses unequal weights and measures, straining out a gnat while swallowing a camel. It is self-righteous, mean-spirited and lacks a redemptive heart.

That being said, if a destructive critic has something truthful to say to me, even if it is said in a harmful or hateful way, I want to hear it. But I will not get into a mudslinging battle with destructive critics or spend my time refuting their claims or responding to their challenges. To do so would be to dishonor the Lord and do a disservice to the body of Christ.

We gain further insight on this from the book of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah was a Jewish exile living in Persia who returned to Judea to rebuild Jerusalem, which lay in ruins. But the enemies of his people were not happy with the progress he was making. So they invited him to meet privately at a distance outside the city in order to do him harm.

In response, he sent messengers to them, saying, "'I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?'" (Neh. 6:3b).

Not to be easily deterred, they sent him the same message four more times, and each time he gave them the same answer (Neh. 6:4).

To paraphrase, “I’m busy doing some very important work rebuilding our sacred capital, and that is my highest priority. Why should I neglect that work in order to meet with you, especially since nothing good will come out of it? At best, the meeting will be a distraction from my mission and a waste of time. At worst, it could cost me my life.”

And note that twice-repeated phrase in verse 3, “go down”: “I am carrying on a great project and cannot *go down*. Why should the work stop while I leave it and *go down* to you?”

Nehemiah had to lower himself—literally—to meet with his critics, since it required him to come down from the walls he was working on as well as leave Jerusalem, which in Israelite thought meant “going down,” both physically and spiritually. To what purpose?

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The lesson here for us, especially those of us in positions of leadership is simple: We need to prioritize the work God has called us to do and not be distracted by our critics and opponents. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. explained in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” “Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work.”

In that same spirit, but with his typical verbal bombast, the German evangelist Reinhard Bonnke, who preached the gospel to tens of millions of Africans, explained why he did not take time to respond to his critics: “I’m not getting off a combine

harvester to catch a mouse.” He also said, “My answer to the critics is my next gospel crusade.” All clear!

Note also the persistence of Nehemiah’s opponents, which is so typical of dogged hypercritics. They did not take “no” for an answer—not once and not even five times, finally sending a letter to him containing dangerously libelous accusations (Neh. 6:5-7).

It is foolish to imagine that men with such evil intent could be reasoned with or won over. Best to pray for them, to ignore their attacks and to focus on the work God has assigned you to do.

Dealing with destructive critics is similar to this, akin to diving into a black hole. There is no end in sight, and nothing you do will satisfy them short of completely repudiating your own convictions and joining in with their cause. Don’t be deceived. In fact, one response from you might provoke 10 fresh attacks against you. And then what?

I have often naively thought that I could reason with people who viewed me as the devil incarnate, thinking that, through logic and patience, I could change their views. That might be possible if not for the fact that some don’t believe a word I say, while for others, their ideological/theological system is so entrenched that they cannot entertain the idea that even a single detail of their system is flawed.

Why, then, take precious time away from devotion to God and service to people in order to engage in fruitless arguing and debate? It is far better to keep your high moral ground, not getting dragged into a mudslinging battle and refusing to lower yourself to the mindset and methodology of the hostile critics. We must keep our higher moral ground lest we get dirtied and stained.

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Destructive critics are often immature, engaging in name-calling and insults. When you start to play their game, you get soiled as well.

Destructive critics are also known to ride on the reputations of the people they attack, using those names as clickbait. When you engage them, you empower them, giving them a bigger platform and even a sense of validity.

It's also good to ask yourself why you feel the need to respond to these critics. Is it for the good of the body or because of pride? If the former, perhaps a constructive teaching on a relevant subject would be better. If the latter, crucify it. (When it comes to confronting heresy and heretics, by all means, let us do so with clarity and boldness, but even here, let us do this in a Christlike way.)

Thankfully, not all critics are destructive, and some, who have honest questions and concerns, are more than happy to hear the truth.

It was critics like that who got the attention of King, and it was in response to them that he wrote his letter, saying, "But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statements in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms."

What made King's response so good was that, rather than simply defending himself against misconceptions and falsehoods, he laid out a compelling case for his cause, thereby challenging the errors of the critics. We are all the better for it.

So, as a leader with a mission and commission, give yourself to the work God has called you to, staying on that wall and refusing to be dragged down into needless controversy and strife. You are needed on your post, and the Lord expects you

to be there.

And if you meet critics with genuine questions, civil people whose whole identity is not caught up in accusation and attack, do your best to give them solid answers.

They may just become some of your most faithful co-workers and friends.

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