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Title: Responding to Criticism

Text: Nehemiah 4:1-23

From time to time I come across a chapter or portion of Scripture that is so packed with content that it could be a series on its own. Nehemiah chapter 4 meets that qualification. I could preach for a month on this chapter. Every Christian leader would do well to meditate on Nehemiah chapter 4 frequently. It's that good and practical. I would encourage you to read this chapter during the week, meditate on it, and allow the lessons it contains to sink into your hearts and minds. Whenever you find yourself under fire, RUN - don't walk - back to Nehemiah chapter 4.

Nehemiah chapter 4 is about an unfortunate but inevitable companion to leadership: CRITICISM and OPPOSITION. It's pretty much a fact of life. When you try to do anything - especially something good - there will be those who think it's their job to criticize you, AND sometimes there will even be those who think it's their job to stop you. If you're not enduring criticism in some form or fashion right now, check your pulse: make sure you're still alive OR check to see if you have anything on your schedule. Maybe the reason no one criticizes you is because you're not really doing much of anything. As Elbert Hubbard said, "To avoid criticism, do nothing, say nothing, be nothing."

One of Aesop's Fables illustrates the nature of criticism and critical people - and the futility of trying to listen to them. It's a story of an old man and his son bringing a donkey to market. Along the way, they hear someone say, "Look at those two foolish people. They're walking when they could be riding in comfort." The idea seemed to make sense, so the old man and his son climbed onto the donkey and continued on their way. It wasn't long before they heard another comment as they passed someone on the road. "Look at those lazy people. They're breaking the back of that poor donkey. He'll be so tired by the time they get to market, no one will want to buy him." So the old man got off the donkey and walked beside him, and his son continued to ride. Soon they heard someone say, "What a terrible thing. The old man has to walk while the young boy gets to ride." So they traded places. In a short while, there was another comment: "Look at that selfish man. He rides the donkey and makes the little boy walk." The old man and the boy thought long and hard about the situation, and finally came up with a solution. They tied the donkey to a pole, placed each end of the pole on their shoulders, and they carried him as they continued their journey. As they crossed a bridge, the pole broke, the donkey came loose, fell into the river and drowned. The moral here is that you can't please everyone - and if you try, you'll probably end up losing your donkey in the process.

I don't need to spend much time describing criticism because we know what it is through experience. You've likely heard it from a host of sources - your husband or your wife, your kids, your co-workers, your boss or your employees, your friends or your enemies, maybe even total strangers. So I don't need to go into detail about the criticism you're facing, but I do want to spend a moment looking at Nehemiah's critics, just to help you understand that in 2500 years (or more), critics haven't really changed that much. They basically use the same playbook today that they used in Nehemiah's day. Apparently, they're not a very creative bunch. Look at what they did. *"When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed"* (vs. 1). We first met Sanballat in chapter 2, and Nehemiah's response to him then was, "Look, this is really none of your business." But, like all critics, it being none of his business didn't stop Sanballat from talking trash. *"He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, 'What are those feeble Jews doing?'"* (vs. 2). Notice the phrase *"in the presence of his associates."* Critics are always looking for an audience. Rarely will they come straight to you and say, "Let's discuss this matter one on one." They would much rather talk about you to anyone who will give them an ear. Do you know what you can do about that? When someone starts criticizing someone else in your presence, when it's a situation that doesn't involve you, your best response is to plug your ears and ignore what they say. Don't be an audience for critics. *"...he said, 'What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble - burned as they are?'"* ³*Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, 'What they are building - if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!'"* (vs. 2-3). You see the insults and the ridicule and the condescension? As time went on, they turned up the fire on their opposition, moving from insults to threats and harassment. *"They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it"* (vs. 8). Notice the phrase, *"stir up trouble."* That's what this type of person likes to do. They're not really accomplishing anything themselves, so they create problems for others. During this election season, I suspect we will see such behavior continue. It appears to me that there are some people who aren't actually campaigning for a particular candidate, they just want to create problems for the candidate they don't like. People on

both sides of the political coin do this. I suppose they actually think they're accomplishing something when they boo and heckle a candidate. They may temporarily disrupt a speech, but they rarely change anyone's mind. They just want to stir up trouble. *"Also our enemies said, 'Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to their work'"* (vs. 11). Now, as we will see, Nehemiah took these threats seriously and he took steps to protect his project and protect his people. The troublemakers scored a minor victory because Nehemiah had to divert attention and resources to accommodate their threats, but they ultimately lost the battle. Nehemiah and his people finished building the wall in spite of Sanballat's attempts at intimidation. When YOU try to do something GOOD, YOU'LL likely face the same thing: mockery, ridicule, skepticism, condescension, and sometimes even threats and outright opposition. It's an all but guaranteed thing. Therefore, today we'll talk about five ways you can respond to criticism and opposition in your work, in your family life, in your ministry.

- 1. Keep praying about it.** We see this again and again throughout the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah prayed at every turn. I think there are 9 prayers in these 13 chapters. So when Sanballat and Tobiah began their routine against the rebuilding of the wall, Nehemiah's first response was to take it to God. Nehemiah didn't pull any punches with his prayer, either. Listen to what he said: *"Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sin from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders"* (vs. 4-5). Nehemiah's prayer might not have been theologically correct - but he was correct in pouring out his heart to God right off the bat. He was saying, in effect, "God, don't let these enemies destroy us or destroy the work we're doing." And that's the RIGHT response - it should be our first response - when opposition arises. We see it again in verse 9 when they plotted together to stir up *trouble*. Nehemiah said, *"But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat."* I challenge you to make prayer your first resort, not your last. It will revolutionize your life as a leader.
- 2. Keep your eye on the ball.** *"So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart"* (vs. 6). I want you to notice that Nehemiah didn't say anything to Sanballat and Tobiah. He didn't defend his strategy. He didn't argue with them about whether or not the materials they were using would hold up. When they said a mere fox could make the walls crumble, he didn't bring a pack of foxes to prove them wrong. He didn't counter-attack. He didn't call them names. What did Nehemiah and his people do? They *"rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart."* Nehemiah's attitude was, "You can criticize us all you want; we'll just work a little harder." When you hear criticism, or when you hear about criticism that has been directed toward you, don't EVER lose sight of WHAT YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE DOING. Don't lose sight of the work or job you've been called to do. Keep your eye on the ball. Keep doing your job. Keep building the wall. Keep working with all your heart.
- 3. Keep your guard up.** I want you to understand that there is a difference between responding to a threat and responding to criticism. Responding to criticism - which amounts to little more than arguing - is futile - it's a waste of time. Responding to a threat is different. Nehemiah protected himself. Do likewise - PROTECT YOURSELF. I'm not JUST talking about threats of violence. I'm talking about the kind of threat we are always up against - the threat from our common enemy to do us in at his first opportunity. Satan would love to destroy your morale, your momentum, your credibility, your reputation and he'll do it if you give him half a chance. Nehemiah did not respond to the criticism aimed at him, but when the criticism turned into threats, he said, *"...we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat"* (vs. 9). Sure there is a time to turn your cheek, BUT Nehemiah shows us that there is also a time to stand your ground. Again in verse 13, *"There I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows."* Nehemiah didn't go on the offensive, but he began taking the steps necessary to protect himself and his people. There are also steps you can take to protect yourself from the attacks of others. If you're dealing with someone who is constantly twisting your words, you might do well to put it in writing. Another suggestion would be to follow up important conversations with an email saying, "This is what we discussed or this is what we decided to do." This helps prevent any tendency toward confusion or deception later. Another way you can keep your guard up is to avoid situations where people can make up stories about you. This is why Paul said, *"Abstain from all appearance of evil"* (1 Thessalonians 5:22). Don't frequent questionable places. Don't hang with questionable people. Don't be alone with persons of the opposite sex. Don't borrow money from petty cash with the idea of paying it back later. Don't visit websites with even partially questionable content. Do your best to not give anyone ammunition to make things up about you. It's an unfortunate reality of leadership, an unfortunate reality of ministry, but a wise leader will do what

he can to protect himself. Watch your back. It would be nice if it wasn't necessary - just like it would be nice if we didn't have to buy locks for our houses and put virus protection on our computers. It would be nice, but that's not how it is. If you're a leader, you need to develop the habit of protecting yourself and those around you. As Nehemiah said, *"Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon with the other"* (vs. 17). He also said, *"Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water"* (vs. 23). He is saying, in effect, "We were ALWAYS ready; we NEVER let our guard down." YOU also need to ALWAYS BE READY - not cynical, not jaded, not distrustful of everyone's intentions - just cautious, AND PREPARED. Keep your guard up. Don't give the enemy an easy shot at you.

- 4. Keep spending time with the right people.** When Nehemiah first began responding to threats, he said, *"I stationed some of the people behind the lowest point of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families..."* (vs. 13). I think he did it this way because he knew that families would take an extra effort to protect one another. He also knew that during threatening times, families needed to be close to one another. There are people in your life - most likely beginning with your family, and including your closest friends - who are able to stand with you at your weakest points, in your most vulnerable places. Don't ignore them. Don't try to go it alone. Post them at the "lowest points of your wall" and lean on them for strength and protection. *"Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, 'The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall'"* (vs. 19). *"We are widely separated from each other,"* he says. That's when we're most vulnerable to attack. *"Whenever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us"* (vs. 20). When you're facing criticism and opposition, make sure that you are spending time with others. That's why it is so important to be involved in a church, in a Home Bible Study, in a Sunday School class, in a small group. That's why it is important for families and friends to spend time together. These moments remind you that you are not alone. Sometimes your work separates you from everyone else - but make sure that, at certain moments, you are banding together with close friends and family members. Spend time with the right people.
- 5. Keep reminding yourself of what's really important.** When the threats reached their peak, Nehemiah says, *"I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, 'Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes'"* (vs. 14). Nehemiah is saying, "Remember the Lord. Remember it is He whom you serve. Remember it is He who protects you." And he is saying, "Remember your family. The work you are doing is designed to protect them for generations to come AND if it is necessary for you to engage in battle TODAY, it is for their benefit that you fight." Don't forget to remind yourself from day to day WHY you are doing what you are doing. Remind yourself that you are SERVING GOD - it is HIS glory you want to see manifested in your life AND remind yourself that you are SERVING OTHERS. He's called you to a task to benefit certain people. If you keep focused on this, you won't get sidetracked by criticism. Let me give an example. If you work with children, youth, or adults for that matter, you will likely be criticized no matter what you do. "You're too strict or you're too lenient. Your lessons are too deep or you're not teaching the Bible enough. You play too many games or you're too boring. You too disorganized or you're a control freak. You sing songs that nobody knows or you sing the same old songs again and again." After a while - believe me, I know - it can get to you. Sometimes you want to throw in the towel. You think, "There are other ways I could spend my spare time that don't involve listening to parent's complain." At these moments, it is important to remind yourself what is really important. Remember the Lord and the people you serve. Remember what you're trying to accomplish, the goals you've set out to achieve. This is what's really important. Keep reminding yourself of this every day.
- 6. Conclusion.** Criticism is a fact of life. Why are there so many critics? Benjamin Disraeli once said, "It is easier to be critical than to be correct." It is also easier for some to criticize others than it is to actually get involved doing good things themselves. For this reason, criticism is unavoidable. Critics are like the gnats you have to deal with when you're outdoors. The sun is warm, the scenery is beautiful, the fresh air is invigorating - BUT those gnats can be really annoying. But sometimes they're just part of the outdoor experience. You've got to put up with them. And if you're in leadership, you have to put up with criticism and opposition. The key is NOT to fight back. The key IS to keep moving forward, keep doing what God has called you to do. Keep focused on Him. Keep focused on the work. Keep your guard up. Keep in contact with the right people. Keep reminding yourself of why you do what you do. THIS is how you respond to criticism. Leaders must remember: Ignore the critics, Defuse the threats, and Keep building the wall.