

SEASONED WITH SALT

A GOSPEL GUIDE TO CRITICISM



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*"Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know
how you ought to answer each person."*

Colossians 4:6

A Call to Self-Examination and Grace

Censorious

Definition: To be censorious is to be overly critical of others: fault-finding, harsh, eager to expose weakness. It is a tendency to look for and magnify the flaws in people, often while minimizing or ignoring our own.

Censoriousness is one of those subtle sins that can take root quietly, often dressed up as concern, insight, or zeal for truth. But beneath it lies a dangerous tendency: to elevate ourselves while tearing others down.

In *The Bruised Reed*, Richard Sibbes speaks with wisdom and compassion when he says:

- "We love to wander from ourselves and to be strangers at home."
- "Towards others he is not censorious, as being taken up at home."

These two statements offer a profound insight into the heart of criticism.

"We love to wander from ourselves..."

We often busy ourselves with the sins and shortcomings of others, pointing out their faults, judging their motives, dissecting their actions, while remaining wilfully blind to our own. We judge others harshly, yet excuse ourselves. We hold others to a high standard while measuring ourselves with leniency. We magnify their specks while ignoring our beams.

"Taken up at home..."

The one who is "taken up at home" is deeply aware of their own sin, frailty, and daily need for the mercy and grace of God in Christ. They are not preoccupied with others' failures, because they are too humbly occupied with their own repentance and growth. Their attention is turned inward, not in self-loathing, but in joyful dependence on Jesus.

Sibbes' point is clear: the more you are "taken up at home," the less likely you are to be censorious.

- You will not be a fault-finder: because you are daily aware of how far short you fall.
- You will not be hypercritical: because you are constantly receiving and celebrating God's grace.
- You will not obsess over others' weaknesses: because your heart is full of gratitude for God's mercy to you.

The Rotten Fruit of Censoriousness

Censoriousness is not a harmless habit. It spreads like disease and rots the soul. It trains your eyes to see the worst in everything and everyone. It fixates on others' specks and distracts from Christ. It depletes your joy, distorts your view, and disables spiritual fruitfulness. It is deeply anti-gospel.

The Bible asks pointed questions: "who are you to judge another man's servant?" (Romans 14:4), "who are you to judge your neighbour?" (James 4:12).

Seven Reasons Censoriousness is Deadly

1. **Conceit:** censoriousness is pride in disguise. It places you above others, as better, wiser, deeper, more discerning. It flatters you while flattening others. But Scripture warns against being "wise in your own eyes" (Proverbs 3:7).
2. **Wilfully Blind:** it turns your eyes outward, so you miss your own desperate need for grace. Like the Pharisee in Luke 18, you end up thanking God that you're not like "those sinners." This blindness stunts growth, you can't repent of sin you refuse to see.
3. **Miserable:** fault-finding starves your soul of joy. You stop seeing beauty in others, hope in situations, or evidence of God's work. You see only what is wrong. Censorious people are often joyless people, ungrateful, bitter, discontent.
4. **Gossip:** censoriousness rarely stays silent. It leaks into speech – often disguised as "concern" or "venting." But the Bible calls it what it is: gossip. It tears down instead of building up, spreads bitterness instead of love.
5. **Satan-like:** in Revelation 12, Satan is called "the accuser of the brethren." But Jesus is our Advocate, Intercessor, and Comforter. He covers, restores, and speaks well of His people. Who, then, are we reflecting when we continually accuse?
6. **Divisive:** censoriousness never brings peace. It breaks fellowship, breeds suspicion, stokes division. It doesn't pursue unity, bear with others, or believe the best (1 Corinthians 13). Where it reigns, harmony dies.
7. **Discouraging** A censorious spirit drags others down. Instead of lifting burdens, it adds to them. Instead of inspiring growth, it provokes shame. Instead of encouraging, it discourages. We are called to build one another up – not wear each other down.

A Better Way

The gospel shows us a better way: to be gracious, patient, slow to speak, eager to understand, quick to forgive. To imitate Jesus, who did not break the bruised reed or snuff the smouldering wick. Let us be those who are "taken up at home," deeply aware of our need, and deeply amazed by His mercy. Then, and only then, can we gently correct others in love, with a heart full of grace and a mouth full of encouragement.

The Wounded Roots of a Critical Spirit

Censoriousness is often rooted in pride and legalism, in the belief that we are superior, or that others must meet our standards. But its roots can also be emotional. These emotional roots do not excuse a critical spirit, but they do help explain its formation. Behind a harsh voice is often a hurting heart. Understanding the pain behind a censorious posture doesn't weaken the call to repentance, it strengthens it with compassion. Jesus, our Shepherd, calls us not only to put off sin, but to let him heal the wounds that feed it.

1. Hurt Can Harden the Heart

Repeated wounds, especially those left unacknowledged or untreated, can lead to self-protection that manifests as judgment. The hurting soul may reject or criticize others before they have a chance to be rejected themselves. Grace begins to feel dangerous. Vulnerability, unsafe. Criticism becomes a shield.

2. Betrayal Breeds Suspicion

Where trust has been broken, suspicion can take root. A betrayed heart may become hyper-vigilant, reading motives through the lens of past pain. Others are seen not as image-bearers, but as potential threats. This often results in pre-emptive judgment, assuming the worst to avoid being hurt again.

3. Disappointment Leads to Cynicism

Repeated disappointments, in people, in leaders, in communities, can quietly erode hope. The result is cynicism: the inability to see good, to expect grace, or to believe in redemption. A person shaped by chronic disappointment may stop seeing others clearly and instead relate through a lens of bitterness and distrust.

4. Unprocessed Pain Becomes Projection

Unhealed wounds have a way of showing up in our reactions. Sometimes we are most critical of others in areas where we ourselves are most broken. Censoriousness often targets people who mirror parts of our story we haven't faced, failures, weaknesses, traits we've rejected in ourselves. The criticism isn't really about them. It's our pain, projected.

5. Pain Can Erode Compassion

When a person is in emotional survival mode, empathy can become too costly. Compassion requires emotional energy that wounded hearts often feel they can't spare. Others begin to look like burdens instead of fellow sufferers. Fault-finding becomes a default because mercy feels out of reach.

Healing the Roots

Jesus doesn't just confront our censoriousness, he heals the brokenness beneath it. he calls us to repentance, yes, but he also invites us to rest. To bring our wounds to him. To let his grace soften what hurt has hardened. To let his kindness melt our suspicion. To let his mercy make us merciful. Censoriousness can be a fruit of a heart in pain, a sinful response to suffering. But Christ offers something better, a heart made new, softened by grace, filled with compassion, free to love.

Speaking the Truth in Love

Criticism is something we will all give and receive in life, in families, churches, friendships, and leadership. But how we offer it, and why, reveals the condition of our hearts. In Christ, our words are never aimless or neutral. They carry weight. They can give life or bring harm. They can restore or they can crush.

That's why Scripture calls us not simply to speak truth, but to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), truth that is clothed in humility, gentleness, and grace. We are called to correct, not to condemn. To build up, not to break down. To season our speech with grace (Colossians 4:6), and to aim not at winning arguments, but at winning hearts.

Gospel-shaped criticism flows from love, aims for restoration, and is delivered in humility. It is not driven by ego, irritation, or the need to be right, but by a sincere desire for others to flourish in Christ. So what does this look like in practice? Here are some principles for offering correction in a way that reflects the heart of Jesus, full of truth, full of grace.

1. It Must Be Constructive

The goal of criticism is restoration and growth, not just pointing out flaws. Biblical correction is never about tearing down, it's about building others up (Ephesians 4:29). True criticism answers the question: How can I help this person thrive in Christ? Constructive doesn't mean sugar-coating. But it does mean your aim is redemptive, not destructive. "Let all that you do be done in love."

2. It Must Come from Love

Check your motives. Are you criticizing because you're frustrated, offended, or want to feel superior? Or are you moved by love for their good? Philippians 2:3 reminds us, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves." If it's about you, your reputation, your preferences, your pride, then it's not gospel-shaped. Criticism that flows from love seeks the good of the other, not the relief of your own emotions.

3. Tone Matters: Gentle, Patient, Kind

Biblical correction must reflect the fruit of the Spirit: love, patience, kindness, gentleness (Galatians 5:22-23). The right message in the wrong tone is still wrong. Paul tells Timothy to correct opponents with gentleness, hoping that God may lead them to repentance (2 Timothy 2:24-25). Even when confronting sin, we do so gently, as those who also need grace (Galatians 6:1).

4. Do You Also Encourage?

If you only ever speak when something is wrong, and never when things go well, you're not correcting, you're condemning. Paul often starts his letters by encouraging believers before offering correction (1 Corinthians 1:4–9). That reflects God's heart: He doesn't only discipline His children, He also delights in them. "Encourage one another and build one another up." (1 Thessalonians 5:11) Criticism divorced from encouragement becomes demoralizing. Encouragement without correction becomes shallow. The gospel holds both together.

5. If You Can't Take It, Don't Dish It Out

Jesus warns us about hypocrisy: "Why do you see the speck in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log in your own?" (Matthew 7:3). If you're quick to correct but resistant to receive correction, that's a warning sign. A humble heart is both willing to give and receive godly criticism.

6. Watch the Timing: Criticism Needs Space

Avoid bringing criticism immediately after someone has served, whether they've just preached, led worship, cooked, or helped. At those times, they're often emotionally spent and more vulnerable. Also, you probably haven't had time to reflect either. Don't let your words be reactionary. Proverbs 15:28 says, "The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer." Take a moment. Pray. Wait. Come back later with thoughtfulness, not raw reaction.

7. Start With Care: Check in First

Before correcting someone, ask: How are they doing? Are they going through something painful? Are they already discouraged? Is this the best time? Relational credibility matters. People are more open to correction when they know you genuinely care. If your words aren't preceded by love, they won't land in the heart.

8. Go to Them, Not Others

Jesus gives clear instruction in Matthew 18:15; if your brother sins, go to him. Not to your friends. Not to your group chat. Not to your spouse. Go to them. Talking about people instead of to them is gossip, not godly correction. It breeds distrust and division. It may feel easier, but it's never faithful.

Before you criticise ask yourself: is this loving? Is this necessary? Is this wise? Is this seasoned with grace?

Hearing the Truth in Humility

Receiving well-meant, thoughtful criticism is still hard. But how we respond reveals a lot about our humility, maturity, and understanding of the gospel. Receiving criticism well is a sign of spiritual maturity. It shows you're more committed to Christlikeness. Here's a short, gospel-shaped guide on receiving well-meaning criticism.

*"Let the righteous strike me,
it is a kindness.
Let him rebuke me,
it is oil for my head.
Let my head not refuse it."*

Psalm 141:5

1. Start With Humility

"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Assume that you don't see everything clearly. You're a sinner in need of grace, and you have blind spots like everyone else. A humble heart is teachable, not defensive. Ask yourself: What if they're right? Even partly right?

2. Listen First, Don't React

"Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger." Resist the urge to interrupt, explain, or justify. Just listen. You may feel misunderstood at first, but understanding can come after listening. Your first job is to hear them out completely.

3. Assume Good Intentions

"Love believes all things, hopes all things". If someone is offering thoughtful, loving criticism, assume they mean well, especially if they've proven themselves to care about you. Don't let your insecurities project ill motives onto someone acting in love.

4. Ask Clarifying Questions

"The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice." Don't rush to conclusions. With a humble posture, ask things like:

- "Can you give me an example?"
- "Is there something I could've done differently?"
- "How did that come across?"

5. Thank Them

"Wounds from a friend can be trusted." It takes courage and care for someone to speak up. Honour that. Thank them for taking the time and risking discomfort to speak into your life. That's love.

6. Take Time to Reflect

Not all feedback needs to be responded to instantly. It's okay to say:

"Thank you for sharing that. I need a bit of time to process it and pray."

Give yourself space to sort through what's true, what may be exaggerated, and what's helpful for your growth.

7. Bring It Before the Lord

Ask God:

- "Is there truth here I'm resisting?"
- "What does repentance or change look like for me?"
- "How does this shape me into Christlikeness?"

The gospel allows you to face flaws without fear, because your identity isn't in your performance; it's in Christ.

8. Make Changes Where Needed

If the feedback is accurate and helpful, respond with action, not just words. Real repentance isn't defensive, it's willing to change.

9. Don't Let It Define You

Even fair criticism doesn't define who you are. The cross does. You are loved, forgiven, growing, and being sanctified. Don't let correction turn into condemnation.

Discussion and Reflection Questions

Part 1: Giving Criticism

1. What motivates you when you offer criticism?
 - Is it love for the other person? Frustration? A desire to be seen as right?
 - How can you better discern your heart before speaking?
2. How would someone describe your tone when you correct others?
 - Gentle? Sarcastic? Harsh? Avoidant?
 - Where might your tone be misaligned with gospel love?
3. Do you balance criticism with encouragement?
 - Think of the last few conversations where you corrected someone, did you also affirm what's good?
 - Do you tend to encourage and point out what's good in others?
4. When is the last time you gave feedback too quickly, without prayer or reflection?
 - What could have gone differently if you waited?
5. How can Jesus' way of speaking truth in love shape your next hard conversation?

Heart-Check Questions:

- Do I pray before I give criticism?
- Do I care more about being helpful or being right?
- Am I trying to win a person, or win an argument?
- Is my ultimate goal healing, holiness, or control?
- How can I use my words today to reflect Jesus' gentleness and truth?

Part 2: Receiving Criticism

1. What's your usual response when someone corrects you?
 - Do you shut down, defend, lash out, or genuinely listen?
2. Why is it hard for you to receive criticism, even when it's meant for your good?
 - Is it fear of failure? Shame? A need to be seen as competent?
3. Have you ever received poorly given criticism that was still partially true?
 - How did you respond?
 - How could the gospel have helped you respond better?
4. Who in your life can speak hard truths to you, and how do you show that you welcome it?
5. How does your identity in Christ free you to receive feedback without fear or defensiveness?
 - Reflect on how the gospel speaks into your desire to be approved, affirmed, or justified.

Example Prayers

When You've Given Harsh Criticism

Father, forgive me. I spoke in a way that lacked grace. I was too harsh, too quick, too selfish. I see now that I cared more about being right than being loving. Thank You that Your mercy covers even this. My hope is not in how well I speak, but in how perfectly Christ has spoken for me. Help me go back in humility, to seek forgiveness and make things right. Teach me to speak like Jesus, full of grace and truth. Let my words bring healing, not harm.

When You're About to Give Loving Criticism

Father, help me speak with both truth and love. You see this person fully, far better than I do. You know their heart, their burdens, and what they need to hear. Help me not to speak from pride, frustration, or fear, but from love. Let my words be clear, kind, and gracious. Give me the courage to say what is needed, and the humility to say only what is helpful. Guard me from harshness, sarcasm, or self-righteousness. Make me a vessel of Your care, not just a voice of correction. May this conversation serve their good and reflect Your heart.

When You've Received Harsh Criticism

Father, You see my heart. What was said hurt. It was unfair, unkind, poorly timed. I feel defensive, discouraged, angry. But You are my refuge and my righteousness. Help me not to return harshness for harshness. Guard my heart from bitterness. Even in this, help me to be humble. If there's truth, help me receive it. If not, help me let it go in grace. Thank You that Jesus was wrongly judged, yet never sinned in return. Make me more like Him. Heal what stings, soften what's hard, and let my identity rest in You, not in anyone's opinion of me.

When You've Received Healthy, Helpful Criticism

Father, thank You for loving me enough to grow me. I'm grateful for the courage and care it took to speak truth into my life. I know this was for my good, and I want to receive it with humility. But it still stings. Being corrected is never easy. Thank You that my worth isn't in getting it all right, but in being Yours. Help me not to withdraw or get discouraged, but to listen, reflect, and grow. Shape me through this, gently, deeply, and more into the image of Jesus.

Scripture Passages on Giving Criticism Well

Ephesians 4:15 - *"Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ."*

Criticism must combine truth with love. It's about helping others grow toward Christ, not just making a point.

Proverbs 27:6 - *"Faithful are the wounds of a friend"*

Real love includes honest correction, even when it hurts. A true friend is willing to speak hard truths.

Galatians 6:1 - *"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently."*

Correction should always aim at gentle restoration, not condemnation.

Proverbs 25:11–12 - *"A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver. Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold is a wise reprover to a listening ear."*

Timely, wise words of correction are beautiful and valuable when delivered with skill and grace.

Colossians 4:6 - *"Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person."*

Even correction should be flavoured with grace. Not biting, but thoughtful and wise.

2 Timothy 2:24–25 - *"And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness."*

Criticism should be done with kindness, patience, and gentleness, not quarrelsomeness.

Matthew 18:15 - "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother."

Correction should be personal, not public, with the goal of restoration and reconciliation.

James 1:19-20 - "Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God."

Criticism must not be driven by impulse or emotion, but by wisdom and restraint.

Proverbs 15:1 - "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."

The tone of your words matters just as much as the content.

Romans 15:1-2 - "We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbour for his good, to build him up."

Correction should never be self-serving. Its goal is to build up, not tear down.

Scripture Passages on Receiving Criticism Well

Proverbs 9:8–9 - “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 be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning.”

The wise welcome correction because they know it helps them grow.

Proverbs 12:1 - “Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid.”

A teachable spirit is a mark of maturity and wisdom. Rejecting correction is foolishness.

Proverbs 15:31–32 - “The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise. Whoever ignores instruction despises himself, but he who listens to reproof gains intelligence.”

Wise people invite feedback. They see reproof as life-giving, not threatening.

Psalms 141:5 - “Let a righteous man strike me, it is a kindness; let him rebuke me, it is oil for my head; let my head not refuse it.”

Even painful correction can be a gift from God when given in righteousness.

James 1:19–21 - “Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”

Receiving criticism well means slowing down, listening fully, and resisting defensive anger.

Proverbs 17:10 - “A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool.”

The wise let even one word of correction sink in. The foolish resist even repeated warnings.



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