



# STICKS AND STONES

**Finding freedom in the face of criticism**

**by Rich Dixon**

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Sticks and Stones

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Have you struggled to deal with criticism? I suspect we all have at some point. Friend, co-worker, boss, parent, we've all received hurtful criticism.

In this e-book I'll raise some questions and hopefully offer some fresh perspective. Some of the topics include

- What is criticism?
- What motivates a critic?
- How is criticism different from feedback?
- What's the difference between reacting and responding?
- What are some considerations in responding to criticism?
- How do we deal with self-criticism?
- What does Jesus say about dealing with critics and criticism?
- Does ignoring hurtful comments really help?
- How do relationships impact our responses?

As with most difficult interactions in life, there are no simple, magic solutions to dealing with criticism. I hope this material offers some ideas and new ways to approach a painful issue.

I'd love to hear from you. Please send me a comment via email ([rich@richdixon.net](mailto:rich@richdixon.net)) and [stop by my blog](#).

*Rich*

# PART 1: CRITICISM VS. FEEDBACK

*If you have no heart to change it,  
you have no right to criticize it.*



I'm skeptical whenever someone offers "constructive criticism." In fact, I believe it's an oxymoron.

Criticism is verbal abuse, and like other forms of abuse it's about power and control through violence and intimidation. There's nothing constructive about it.

Criticism is essentially a passive-aggressive form of boasting, an easy way to attract attention while feigning concern. Critics claim that they're trying to help, but the real intent is to find fault, to highlight some flaw or failure. The critic has little interest in working to improve a situation.

In a sadly transparent admission of impotence, the critic attempts to cast himself as the expert, raising his perceived status by diminishing someone else.

As Benjamin Franklin said, "Any fool can criticize, complain, and condemn, and most fools do."

## THE MOB

Criticism is often simply a cheap way to create artificial controversy. Talk radio and cable "news and commentary" fill endless hours with disrespectful shouting. An argument draws a crowd, especially a loud argument, and criticism is frequently about drawing the crowd.

Criticism invokes the mob mentality, because the critic wants attention and needs others to agree. One guy is screaming and everyone else is parroting and shouting, "Yeah, right. What he said!"

If you're wondering about a critic's motives, watch what happens when the spotlight fades. The argument immediately moves to the next topic, because the intent's always about attracting attention. It was never about actually working for positive change, because that's usually done in the background without the shouting and recognition.

## FEEDBACK

Feedback differs fundamentally from criticism, because feedback occurs within a relationship. Feedback conveys a desire to help, a willingness to step into a valued process at the risk of personal sacrifice. Feedback comes from someone who's involved or willing to get involved, while criticism originates from those outside the fray.

- Feedback seeks to build, create, and improve. Criticism aims to destroy and tear down.
- Leaders provide feedback. Bosses criticize.
- Feedback is hard work. Criticism is easy.
- Feedback comes from a position of humility and service. Criticism involves authority and arrogance and centers attention on the critic.
- Feedback values people and requires relationship and trust. Criticism focuses selectively on results to devalue individuals and their efforts.
- Feedback requires an emotional investment from the giver, and has the potential to build the emotional reserves of the receiver. Criticism reverses the process.
- Feedback is communication. Criticism is gossip.
- Feedback can be painful, but it offers the possibility of growth and improvement. Criticism is purely hurtful by nature and intent.
- Feedback centers on behavior. Criticism attacks the person.
- Feedback focuses on the receiver. Criticism highlights the critic's status as expert.
- Feedback invites partnership, a shared journey of relationship. The critic stands outside the process.

***Feedback comes from a position of humility and service. Criticism involves authority and arrogance and centers attention on the critic.***

I want authentic feedback, even when it's difficult or even painful to hear. I want a circle of folks who care enough to take the risk of helping me to improve, and I hope I'm open to considering and acting on that sort of input.

I also want to identify and ignore criticism and critics. Without being disrespectful, I want to dismiss criticism as an inevitable result of trying to accomplish something meaningful. In fact, perhaps the presence of a cynical critic is a sign that I'm on the correct path.

I want feedback from people I trust and respect. As someone once said, "No statue has ever been created to honor a critic.

Let's be willing to invest in others by offering feedback. And let's avoid being critics.

***When we judge or criticize another person,  
it says nothing about that person;  
it merely says something about our own need to be critical.***

*What's your reaction to this view of criticism?*

*Do you tend to be a critic? Why?*

*Have you ever confused the notions of criticism and feedback?*

## PART 2: RESPONDING TO CRITICISM

*Never wrestle in the mud with a pig.  
You'll both get dirty, and the pig likes it.*

Since feedback can be useful and criticism can't always be ignored, I thought it might be worthwhile to examine how we respond to feedback and criticism. Bosses, colleagues, and other associates may be critical; it's not always possible, and it's certainly not easy, to ignore their comments.

Criticism isn't helpful, and generally I believe that the best response is to dismiss it. When you pay attention to something, you tend to get more of it. Since a critic's primary motive is to find fault, blame, or complain, there's not much reason to reward it.

### DEFINING TERMS

Feedback and criticism may sound similar, so it's important to differentiate them. Even when identical words are employed, the heart beneath those words and their impact on the listener are substantially different.

Feedback is educational, intended to help me grow by offering an outside view of my behavior. Criticism focuses on fault finding and blaming. Instead of entering a process to improve it, the critic stands outside the process and throws stones.

Feedback comes from service and humility. Criticism is essentially a passive-aggressive form of bragging that aims to demean and diminish me. The critic seeks attention by positioning himself as the expert.

So here are some thoughts about responding to feedback and criticism.



## INTERACTION

I want feedback to be interactive, because it's a conversation in the context of a relationship. I want to ask clarifying questions and determine specifics that help me replicate positive results and improve less desirable outcomes.

Criticism is generally one-way, so it's sometimes best received in writing. This allows for some emotional distance and prevents an endless, on-and-on barrage of attacks intended only to harm and demean with little hope of any positive result.

Written criticism has another advantage—it's easy to wad up the page and deposit it appropriately in the circular file (or hit DELETE).

## INTROSPECTION

Feedback encourages self-examination, an essential aspect of living life on-purpose. Personally, I want to be accountable, so I want feedback. I want people in my circle who reinforce positive behavior, but I also want them to help me see into my blind spots and tell me when I'm getting off course. Feedback, whether congratulation or correction, may be difficult to receive, but it's an essential part of living life on purpose.

Since I generally wish to dismiss criticism, it's difficult to learn much from it. However, I need to be open and realize that criticism may contain some nuggets of truth. If I'm confident within my own skin, I can sift through the junk and seek areas that might require attention.

## ACTION

For me, living on-purpose involves a desire to learn and grow. When I perceive an area where I've missed the mark, I need to acknowledge it and seek ways to improve. I may need to apologize, seek information, or ask for help.

If a critic tells me I failed, that's not a call-to-action. If I can discern a specific area in which I can do better, I need to address it. Otherwise, there's that round file and the DELETE key.

***I want people in my circle who reinforce positive behavior, but I also want them to help me see into my blind spots and tell me when I'm getting off course.***



## EMOTION

I think it's appropriate to express emotion in a feedback environment. Genuine joy and sorrow fit within a relationship. Of course this must be tempered by the setting, but authentic feedback involves an emotional investment from the giver, so it's difficult to deny an emotional response from the receiver.

Criticism is designed to provoke negative emotions so it's best, though certainly not easy, to avoid an emotional reaction. I'm reminded of another of my favorite admonitions:

*Never argue with an idiot. Observers may not be able to tell the difference.*

The only thing that results from arguing, crying, or becoming angry with a critic is additional criticism, because the emotion gives the critic the attention he craves. Scripture advises: "Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels." [2 Tim 2:23]

Those are some of my thoughts. What's your take?

***The only thing that results from arguing, crying, or becoming angry with a critic is additional criticism, because the emotion gives the critic the attention he craves.***

***How do you respond to feedback and criticism?***

***What might you do to avoid emotional reactions to criticism?***

***What would you like to do differently?***

## PART 3: THE CRITIC WITHIN

***One should never criticize himself except  
in a fresh and hopeful mood.  
The self-criticism of a tired mind is suicide.***

Often the harshest critic isn't the boss or the impossible-to-please aunt. The most persistent critic frequently resides in that small space between our ears.

It's impossible to ignore the inner critic. He's always there, and he knows exactly which buttons to push, precisely which words and thoughts will sting the most. He lives and thrives in weak points and sensitive areas that no one else knows about.

This inner critic knows our defensive strategies. The moment we devise a response to his painful poking and prodding, he changes tactics and finds a fresh wound to irritate. He's spy who counters our top-secret self-defense plans before we can even implement them.

Self-criticism is still criticism. It's violence, assault, and abuse, no less unacceptable or excusable because it's self-inflicted. It needs to be identified, labeled, and exposed as a malicious attack.



***Often the harshest critic isn't the boss or the  
impossible-to-please aunt. The most persistent  
critic frequently resides in that small space  
between our ears.***

## EXPECTATIONS

Self-criticism is deeply rooted in the conscious and subconscious messages we've internalized since we were small children. We all have our unique set of "shoulds," expectations passed on from parents, teachers, and our personal interpretations of the culture. They're frequently irrational and impossible to satisfy, but they're powerful weapons with which we attack our sense of self-confidence and self-worth.

I don't possess simple solutions to the problem of the inner critic, but I think a first step is to clarify the internalized imperatives that provide his primary ammunition. I'll share a few of mine and encourage you to construct your own list.

- You should always get an "A."
- Someone else's anger is your fault.
- Being alone is bad.
- You're supposed to please everyone else.
- You should never fail.

***Self-criticism is  
deeply rooted in the  
conscious and  
subconscious  
messages we've  
internalized.***

I could go on, but I don't need to expose all of my dirty psychological laundry. Even though these assumptions are objectively illogical, each of them has been a basis for significant personal strife. A lot of hard work is involved in debunking these myths, but the process can't begin unless we understand the underlying assumptions.

In my own life I realized that for many years I wasted enormous time and energy accumulating superficial relationships, often with people I didn't really enjoy. I needed a large circle of "friends" around me. Whenever I was alone I berated myself as a loser that nobody liked, a silly conclusion that motivated numerous harmful choices.

Why? Because I internalized the myth that being alone is bad, so I had to always be with others. Once I understood the illogical premise that drove my behavior, I was able to re-examine my behavior. I learned that I actually enjoyed a certain amount of solitude, and I stopped my harmful quest for constant casual companionship.

If you're battling self-criticism, perhaps a first response would be to identify the expectation message behind it. What's the irrational, impossible-to-satisfy demand that fuels the internal attack?

## ANTI-GOALS

We're told a lot about the importance of goal-setting, but I think it's equally important to clarify what we're NOT trying to accomplish. A good example might be the general assumption that the purpose of a job is to make as much money as possible. So we make career choices based on income rather than interest or passion, then spend endless hours scheming about the next promotion.

And somewhere along the way we realize that we're investing our lives in things we don't even like or care about in the endless pursuit of a bigger paycheck. But we continue, because that's what work is about.

Only by clarifying that accumulating huge piles of money isn't our goal can we make a change. You have to be clear about what you're not trying to accomplish or those unstated social norms can guide you onto undesired, hurtful paths.

## GENTLE

We're not very comfortable with the notion of gentle.

Our society celebrates toughness and strength. Nice guys finish last. Winning is the ultimate goal. Achievement, progress, growth, and improvement are the self-help buzzwords. If you're not getting better, you're getting worse. Just do it.

There's nothing innately wrong with valuing continuous self-improvement and meaningful progress, but I think we sometimes lose our sense of balance. Once in a while, I think we all need to be a little bit gentle with ourselves.

We're obsessed with being the best parents, the best spouses, even the best Christians. We study and pray and practice, and there's nothing wrong with that. Doing well is a good thing, and excellence is a worthwhile value.

But people were good parents and spouses and Christians for thousands of years, and now you can't do it without a book or a program or a seminar. And since there are unlimited experts with a spectrum of research-based advice, you're increasingly uncertain of the "right" path.

***What's the  
irrational,  
impossible-to-  
satisfy demand  
that fuels the  
internal attack?***

I personally found a lot of peace by living a bit more with gentle. I still work hard, strive to grow and learn and improve. I seek a substantial life, a life of intention and purpose. I don't want to settle.

But I've found that I can do all of those things better if I cut myself a little slack. When my internal self-critic hammers me with a long list of failings and shortcomings, I'm trying to learn to shrug a little more and chuckle at my silly conviction that my puny efforts are somehow essential to the survival of civilization.

There's a familiar Scripture that speaks directly to the notion of gentle.

*"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." [Matthew 11:28-30]*

I especially appreciate the imagery of this passage in The Message.

*"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."*

Jesus doesn't want us to beat ourselves up and allow that nasty internal critic to harass and terrorize us. He wants us to live freely and lightly in the unforced rhythms of His grace.

When that little voice shouts that I'm not doing everything I should, that I'm failing to meet all of those expectations, I'm trying to learn to rest in the knowledge that none of that is His desire for me.

***I've found that I can  
do all of those things  
better if I cut myself a  
little slack.***

## A LIFELONG QUEST

We all confront varying degrees of self-criticism. Regardless of self-awareness, gentleness, or psychological health and balance, I don't think it ever completely disappears.

This short discussion doesn't begin to address the power and invasiveness of the internal critic. He's powerfully entrenched, and no simplistic approach can dislodge him.

Perhaps the best we can hope to do is decrease his sphere of influence by facing and disarming the attack a life of awareness and gentleness.

*If I were to try to read, much less answer, all the attacks made on me,  
this shop might as well be closed for any other business.  
I do the very best I know how, the very best I can,  
and I mean to keep doing so until the end.  
If the end brings me out all right,  
what is said against me won't amount to anything.  
If the end brings me out wrong,  
ten angels swearing I was right would make no difference.*

*Abraham Lincoln*

*What messages or expectations drive your own self-criticism?*

*Does self-criticism limit your ability to live in peace?*

# PART 4: JESUS, CRITICISM, AND FREEDOM

*Sticks and stones can break my bones  
but words can never hurt me.*



Really?

Perhaps that innocent childhood adage should be revised. Sticks and stones can break my bones but words ... can break my heart. Broken bones will mend, but surgery can't heal a broken heart.

Criticism and feedback differ fundamentally in intent, process, and impact. These differences demand alternative responses, and Jesus had a lot to say about both.

Feedback is an offer of service and partnership within a shared journey of relationship.

## THANK YOU

That doesn't mean that feedback isn't sometimes painful. When I fall short or miss the mark, it's difficult to be held accountable. I may rebel initially, but I ultimately want both positive and negative feedback. In the end, I recognize the intent. I understand that offering feedback isn't comfortable, that it might be easier for those who care about me to avoid the discomfort.

My best response to authentic feedback, even when it's painful, is sincere thanks. I'm grateful that others invest enough in my welfare to confront my errors. I'm thankful for a circle in which folks care and want what's best for me. I thank God for people who understand my priorities and aspirations and tell me when I'm settling for less.

That's not a bad little prayer: *Thank you, Jesus, for people with the courage, compassion, and conviction to speak into my life when I miss Your mark.*

## NO THANK YOU?

I've said previously that it's best to ignore or discount criticism whenever possible, as difficult as that may be. Certainly it's best not to reward and encourage a critic with the desired anger or tears.

But the Bible tells me something more. As a follower of Jesus, I'm called to go beyond dismissing a critic's harmful words. Jesus doesn't call us to ignore or condemn our critics. In fact, some of the most familiar passages of Scripture present a very different principle.

- Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors ... For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. [Matthew 6:12, 14-15]
- The parable of the unmerciful servant [Matthew 18]; the speck and the plank [Luke 6]; the parable of the prodigal son [Luke 15]; the parable of the good Samaritan. [Luke 10]
- *Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"*

*Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. [Matthew 18:21-22]*

When I'm attacked by a critic's harmful words, my human instinct screams at me to lash out, fight back, and get even. Rational analysis directs me to simply ignore my tormentor. But Jesus says that not enough. He tells me to forgive.

I don't like that. I don't want to forgive when I've been harmed for no reason, when I don't deserve the hurtful words and the broken heart. But it gets worse—or better.

In the words of the apostle Paul, *"And now I will show you the most excellent way."* [1 Corinthians 12:31b]

***My best response  
to authentic  
feedback,  
even when it's  
painful, is sincere  
thanks.***



## LOVE

*“But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

*“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ lend to ‘sinners,’ expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. [Luke 6:27-36]*

Getting even isn't Christ's way. Ignoring and dismissing aren't steps on His path. Even passive forgiveness isn't sufficient.

Jesus instructs me not only to forgive, but to love those who mistreat me. Love is active; it requires me to reach out and invest myself emotionally in the person who hurts me. **Bless, pray, do good,** and **turn the other cheek** involve action and sacrifice; they're admonitions to purposely seek the best for my critic.

***Rational analysis  
directs me to simply  
ignore my tormentor.  
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## FREEDOM

How can I possibly be free when I actively seek the best for my tormentor? I think that, in simplest terms, there are two reasons.

**Practically,** even in ignoring or discounting my critic I'm allowing harmful words to direct my behavior. When I consciously choose forgiveness and love, I free myself from the burden of reacting. I decide. I'm free.

**Beyond worldly practicalities,** Jesus is always concerned more with His kingdom than ours. He wants me to be free from the things of this world, and He clearly lights the journey toward His sort of freedom with forgiveness and love.

## IT AIN'T EASY

Please don't perceive these words as a guilt trip. When someone's broken your heart, forgiveness is hard. Loving your enemies is nearly impossible.

***Jesus instructs me not only to forgive, but to love those who mistreat me.***

But Jesus didn't take the easy route; He took the right one. He didn't succumb to His human instincts; He conformed to God's plan even when it meant horrible suffering and an undeserved death. His heart, and His body, were broken, but He responded with forgiveness and love. He could have avoided it all, but He did His Father's will, not His own.

He calls me to follow in His footsteps, knowing that it's hard, knowing that I'll fail. And He walks beside me even when I miss the mark, leading me gently on the path to forgiveness, love, and freedom.

I'm glad I don't have to do this stuff alone. By myself, His brand of forgiveness and love are beyond my grasp. Fortunately, I don't have to walk alone. *I can do everything through him who gives me strength.* [Philippians 4:13]

***One who refuses to forgive burns a bridge that he himself needs to cross.***

***What's the hardest part of responding to criticism for you?***

***What do you do when you simply don't want to forgive?***

***How do you find the will to forgive and love a critic?***

## PART 5: IGNORING, ACCEPTING, CONFRONTING

*Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, I would have no time for constructive work.*  
*Martin Luther King, Jr.*

No one wants to endure hurtful attacks or approve unjust actions.

Jesus asks love for our enemies, including those who intentionally harm us through incessant criticism. However, loving enemies doesn't include loving their behaviors. This distinction is both difficult and essential to discovering a healthy response to criticism.

Jesus didn't hesitate to confront and even condemn wrong, but He also saw past behavior, forgave, and loved even those who harmed Him. That's the model we try to follow.

Ignoring criticism is much different than ignoring the critic.

I've received several comments and questions about my claim that it's best to ignore criticism. Apparently there's some feeling that ignoring implies tacit approval, that turning away allows the critic to claim some sort of victory.

I completely understand the urge to confront injustice, and I believe there are occasions that demand the courage to stand up. But I think some principles can guide and inform this question.

***Ignoring criticism is  
much different than  
ignoring the critic.***

## REACT OR RESPOND

Criticism seeks to provoke a reaction. Nothing delights a critic more than anger, tears, or resigned defeat, because emotion provides attention and control. Effective critics become masters at evoking sensational reactions.

Our natural desire to fight back or run away favors the critic. Any emotional reaction feeds his ego and his need for affirmation. While I shout or cry, the critic celebrates a victory. I've given him exactly what he craves, unintentionally increasing the likelihood of further attacks.

It's tempting to try to convince a critic that his harmful actions are unjust, but inciting a reaction by causing harm was the initial intent. As long as he derives attention and perceived status from his behavior, he's not likely to alter it.

Criticism attempts to manipulate, and reaction surrenders control and allows someone else to define my behavior. Stimulus dictates reactive behavior, with no personal input. Regardless of words or methods, that's what a critic hopes to achieve because it provides a sense of power.

Throughout this analysis I've carefully deployed the terms "respond" and "react." Respond differs from react. When I respond, I place myself in the process between stimulus and behavior. I craft a response based not simply upon my feelings, but also my ideals and goals. By responding rather than reacting, I choose my own behaviors. Considered response follows the more difficult path of choosing to live on-purpose and increases my chances of an outcome that conforms to my long-term principles and beliefs.

Ignoring is one possible response to verbal assault. It's not passive or cowardly, and it doesn't imply approval. Often the best, most difficult, and most courageous response to unwarranted criticism is simply to turn away.

Before choosing a different response, some basic principles must be understood.

***Criticism seeks to provoke a reaction. Nothing delights a critic more than anger, tears, or resigned defeat, because emotion provides attention and control.***

## FAIRNESS

It's natural to be offended and outraged by a savage, unfair verbal attack. We seek to correct the record. We want the injustice acknowledged, by others and most of all by the critic himself.

Unfortunately, these instincts are tempered by some basic, and often distasteful, facts.

- I cannot always choose my circumstances.
- I control my response unless I consciously or unconsciously surrender that control.
- I cannot control someone else's attitudes, thoughts, or beliefs.
- I cannot control someone else's behavior unless I'm willing to force compliance through physical or psychological violence.

The cumulative impact of these principles violates our basic sense of fairness. It's not right that someone can freely gossip and lie, and refuse to apologize or even acknowledge their actions. It's wrong to criticize and attack without consequence.

Criticism isn't fair.

Mom said it a million times: "Life's not fair." At the risk of sounding flippant and dismissive, she was right. Others can choose to behave cruelly and disrespectfully, and there's very little I can do about it. I don't like it. I wish it were different. But I can't change the fact that life is frequently not fair.

And even if I have the power to compel certain behaviors in some situations, I absolutely cannot choose another's attitudes. Fair or unfair doesn't change this existential reality.

The sense of injustice tends to prompt a desire for revenge or retribution. These are reactions of violence, and rarely yield positive long-term outcomes. Harming in retaliation only causes additional pain.

***Criticism  
isn't  
fair.***

## CIRCLES

The question remains: is ignoring criticism the coward's way out?

I believe emphatically that wrong ought to be confronted. A substantial life demands the courage to stand for right, regardless of personal consequences.

For me, the issue involves choosing a response that has some chance of improving the situation. I always wish to advocate for good, but I question whether fighting back is the proper response to evil. A shouting contest without mutual accountability only escalates the conflict and gives the critic his audience, leading me to a preciously-stated principle: Never wrestle in the mud with a pig. You'll both get dirty, and the pig enjoys it.

I think about relationships in terms of circles. I belong to many circles: marriage, family, church, and profession to name a few. Each circle involves norms, stated and implied understandings about what it means to reside within the circle. It's in these contexts that I can most effectively confront and challenge criticism.

***I believe emphatically that wrong ought to be confronted. A substantial life demands the courage to stand for right, regardless of personal consequences.***

I choose not to consciously join or invest in a circle in which disrespect is allowed to stand unchallenged. For example, my blog comprises a circle. I welcome and value feedback, the discussion and comments within that community. Disagreement, debate, and dissent make the discussion meaningful, but harmful or disrespectful criticism isn't allowed.

Circles are about influence, not size. The tightness of the circle, the amount of influence, is determined by relationships. Closer relationships mean tighter, more defined circles and greater influence. Within that sort of circle, my response to criticism may improve the situation.

Where the circle's less defined or nonexistent, little or no relationship exists. Influence in such circumstances is minimal, as are opportunities to impact attitudes and behaviors.

Groups that aren't meaningful circles involve minimal input and fewer options. I can't kick a critical neighbor out of the neighborhood or demand a change in behavior. Perhaps the best I can do is express disapproval and then move on.

## WHAT DOES JESUS SAY?

Violence and revenge aren't good options.

*"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. [Luke 6:27-30]*

I don't think His guidance is simply an impractical platitude. In the context of criticism, turning the other cheek denies the critic his intended emotional reaction and attention. In time he'll move on to an easier target.

Relationships are the key.

Jesus confronted most sternly those closest to Him. He certainly stood up to evil and wrong whenever He encountered them, but He didn't waste time arguing endlessly with the critics. He stood up for right, but moved on.

He knew that His influence was greatest with those in his inner circle. Because He first took the time to create strong relationships, He was able to touch their lives in intimate, powerful ways.

## WHAT'S IT ALL MEAN?

It's been said that writers probe their weaknesses and teachers teach best what they most need to learn. That's certainly true with this exploration. My main expertise in responding to criticism comes from my own failures. I tend toward reacting and becoming belligerent and defensive. I want desperately to be right, to win, and to see my critics disgraced and humbled.

I sincerely believe I can do better. As a follower of Jesus, I want to demonstrate assertiveness without aggression, confidence without arrogance, and courage without combativeness. I sincerely want to forgive and love.

***I don't think His guidance is simply an impractical platitude. In the context of criticism, turning the other cheek denies the critic his intended emotional reaction and attention***

I want the openness to receive and act upon authentic feedback and to congratulate and confront those with whom I enjoy close relationships. I seek sensitivity without being overly or inappropriately sensitive. And I know that I'll fail a lot, but I continue to fall into the perfect faithfulness of God's grace.

If you struggle with someone whose critical words and actions have left you wondering what you did wrong, I hope something here helps you understand that the critic's words reflect his weakness, not yours. If you wonder how to face continued attacks, I hope something here helps you formulate a response that brings a measure of peace.

***I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek. But it is just as wrong, or perhaps even more so, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends.  
Martin Luther King, Jr.***

***What's the most important thing you've learned about dealing with criticism?***

***What are you still uncertain about?***



# INFO

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## About the Author

Rich Dixon writes and speaks about overcoming adversity, moving forward in hope and faith, and accomplishing dreams. He's published more than two dozen articles in both Christian and general-market periodicals. He blogs at [www.richdixon.net/bouncingback](http://www.richdixon.net/bouncingback)

Rich is also the author of [RELENTLESS GRACE: God's Invitation To Give Hope Another Chance](#)

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