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Sulfuric Acid to the Soul

It seems almost every weekend we read in our newspapers about some conflict that has occurred. It is usually found in the section of paper where those violent events are described, often with detailed and graphic illustrations. One week there was described a classic conflict between a critical woman and a compliant henpecked man. Criticism...angry biting words...the story described a conflict between... Lucy and Charlie Brown. Lucy puts her hands on her hips and says, "You, Charlie Brown, are a foul ball in the line drive of life! You're in the shadow of your own goal posts! You are a miscue! You are three putts on the eighteenth green! You are a seven-ten split in the tenth frame! You are a dropped rod and reel in the lake of life! You are a missed free throw, a shanked nine iron, and a called third strike! Do you understand? Have I made myself clear?" Criticism is sulfuric acid to the soul. It can eat away your enthusiasm, your zest for life, it stomps on happiness and slams the door of joy. Criticism will tie granny knots in your stomach and rob your sleep. Have you ever been there?

Criticism. Who do you think you are trying to attempt this for God. Your going about it all wrong. You don't have the ability to pull this one off! You weakling! You are just on a power trip...all this work is just to make yourself look good! You think God is going to help you just because you offer a little prayer? What you are doing has absolutely no significance, no value. That project is too big and you are too inexperienced too insignificant... Oh you will work hard at first and then flame out quickly. You will never pull it off. The task is impossible. You don't have the resources. Besides, what you've done so far is of poor quality. You will never amount to much. I always figured you would grow up to be the loser in the family.

Was one of your parents someone you could never please? Nothing was never good enough? How about a boss who never once hands out an "atta boy?" How about that project you worked so hard on, you tried your best, but all you received was the angry slams of criticism. You had

never tried something like that before, going out on the limb... yet there is the critic, clinging to the tree trunk, with a saw in hand. How should we respond to criticism? How are we to react to others dripping the sulfuric acid over our hearts? My purpose this morning is to present a Godly response to criticism. We are going to look at the life of Nehemiah. First, we see the anatomy of the critic. Then the response of the criticized. First the critical attacks and then the wise defense. How are the Godly to respond to criticism? (PRAYER) Open your Bibles to Nehemiah chapter four. Starting with verse one. Remember in chapter three Nehemiah takes a visual tour of the walls of Jerusalem remembering specifically who repaired and completed each part. There was great unity as the men stood next to each other working to build God's wall. Yet, we read here in Chapter four that the wall did not go up without conflict, without criticism. God did not choose to allow His wall to go up opposition free.

(Read 4:1-3) The anatomy of the critic. The attacks of the critical. Be guaranteed that attempts to fulfill God's desires will almost certainly draw opposition. No leader is exempt from criticism. And we know that all criticism is not of the devil, yet a prerequisite for those who desire to be effective is tough skin, callused by the critics. Here are some things to be alert about regarding the critics typical M.O. Their methods of operation.

In verse one we see the critics don't check things out for themselves privately. They love hearsay, love to pump the rumor mill. Verse one, "Sanballat heard" Later in verse 7 "They heard" That was all that was needed and they were off to the land of the critical. In verse 2 we see Sanballat going to talk to others before going to the source. Are you, am I ever guilty of that? He goes and vents his frustration to his brothers ridiculing and mocking them. Critics can think only of their own rights, privilege and agenda being impinged upon. Getting the perspective of the other person, getting into the other person shoes is a totally foreign concept for the habitual critic. Now there is something that may be very obvious but notice that Critics run in packs. Here they have geographically surrounded the wall builders. In verse seven the Arabs and Philistines have joined the opposition. History tells enemies can have strange bedfellows. Critics attract critics. Here in Nehemiah 4

is Sanballat and the gang doing nothing, absolutely nothing, building nothing, but tearing down and criticizing. Their arguments no longer have any logical foundation but are resorting to demeaning ridicule.

You see critics tend to resist change. They are inflexible. Sanballat and the gang did not want to see the power shift in their country. Up until now they were the power brokers, people looked to them for protection and economic assistance. If the wall were built all that would change. They didn't like what this new foreign guy was doing. They were committed to fight the change and the growth all the way. The critic sees only us and "them". Anybody who does not think like "us" is viewed as "them." They see their wall, "not God's wall" they see their plans, their procedure, their arrangements. They see only their rights maligned.

Have you ever experienced the stinging darts of the critic? You know what I find amazing is that the critic never sees himself as a critic. Too painful to admit. Criticism is often veiled in the guise of "firm beliefs" "strong opinions" "speak my mind" "bring some sense" "that's my gift" "how dare they" "that's the way we've always" "we sure need to pray about..." Before you start pointing mental fingers, "Do not think any of us are exempt." We all have a little critic resting inside of us... the question is who are you feeding? The critic or the comforter? the skeptic or the supporter? The mocker or the molder? The ridiculer or the responder? The instigator or the insulator? Who do you want to feed?

Lets take a look at the critics verbal attack. It covers a lot of ground. In verse 2, the critics call them "feeble Jews" The attack? You are too weak to pull this off. Inexperienced. Their strength was criticized. In verse 2, "Are you going to restore this for yourselves?" The attack? Your motives are all wrong. You aren't doing this for God, you're doing this so that you can look good. This is just your own desire for power and control. It's a personal power trip. Their motives were questioned. Further in verse 2, "Can they offer sacrifices?" The attack? Do you think for a minute that God's going to help you? By giving one little sacrifice do you foolishly believe that God will allow you to rebuild this wall in a day? Their faith was ridiculed. "Do you think you can put this up in one day? You are going to flame out give up when it gets tough. This job is too big you don't have the resources! The projects

impossible. Their resolve was tested and resources minimized. Then the final blow in verse 3 by Tobiah. “If a skinny little fox jumped on your wall it would crumble.” The attack? What you have done so far is of poor quality, it’s worthless. Even your best effort is no good. The stinging darts of criticism. Have you ever had your weakness exposed, your motives questioned, faith ridiculed, resolve tested, your quality of work criticized and resources minimized? Then welcome to the land of the critics where skin must grow thick in the fertile soil of skepticism.

Enough of the critics. Lets look at the response of the people. Nehemiah as a tough go get em leader might have been tempted to punch their lights out. But that’s not what he did. How should the Godly respond to criticism? No leader is ever exempt from criticism. It’s toll is heavy and price costly. To please everyone is an impossible task and I believe an unwise and ungodly pursuit. Under humility, the source must be determined and motivation driving the criticism. Some criticism must be responded to and learned from others unconstructive darts must be ignored. It is interesting that God did not choose to allow His wall to be built unopposed.

Lets look at verse four to see how Nehemiah and the people respond. Is it any surprise? Here is the man with the largest pair of prayer gills in the country, he responds in prayer. Notice he is not alone. “We prayed” Nehemiah has modeled prayer and the people are not tempted to respond in vengeance, but prayer. They fight out their aggression in prayer. They knew they weren’t strong enough, they knew their resources were inadequate, that the task was impossible. But they also knew that this was not their wall, but God’s wall. They went to the One who had commissioned the project. This proved that the people truly believed it was God’s wall and not their own.

They cried out to God. “Hey we are taking major hits of ridicule and criticism here. Remember they are in the Old Testament rule of God “you have promised to bless those who bless and curse those who curse” God’s project demanded God’s protection and God’s vengeance. Notice the honesty before God. Can you be real before God and let out your anger fear and frustration? Nehemiah did. Prayer was the first line of defense. We can never be more successful than when we are on our knees in prayer. Those Godly men and women here who advance on

their knees never have to retreat, because prayer provides an invincible shield. How do you respond in an argument? Do you win the argument and lose the battle. Don't fight on your feet...fight on your knees. Respond to criticism in prayer.

Look at the end of verse 6. "And the people had a mind to work." The Godly respond to criticism in two ways. They prayed and persisted. The two go together don't they. One who has no heart to pray... will have no mind to work. Yet, look at the peoples response. A heart to pray and a mind to work. They weren't building their own wall it was God's wall. Out of a love for God, a duty a responsibility they put their minds to work. It is amazing what can be accomplished with someone who has a mind to work. With a mind to work, no matter the tools available, you can accomplish just about anything.

How do the Godly respond to criticism? They prayed and persisted. You see the critics always demoralize...the godly ones encourage. The leader never gives up in the face of trouble but keeps on keeping on. Woody Alan once said, "Half the secret to success is just showing up" Endurance. And Heartfelt prayer. The combination of prayer and persistence is not easily defeated.

It is a guarantee that those who attempt to do the work of God will experience opposition. Maybe you have not experienced any ridicule in your life for attempting to carry out God's work. Maybe no one at work ever makes demeaning Christian jokes. Maybe no one has ever left you out of a conversation. Forgot to invite you to the party. Made fun of your moral convictions. My question is why not? Does Satan and his followers look at you and see nothing worthy of ridiculing. Am I not worthy of being bothered. Have I ever gone out on a limb for Jesus? I know limbs are dangerous places to be, they tend to get buffeted about, the wind blows on them. It's a fearful place to be.

Maybe you find yourself this morning with an overfed critic inside. My question is who do you want to be? Could it be possible that you may be critical of the very thing that God wants to do in your family, at your work, here in the church? Who do you truly want to feed? The critic or the comforter? the skeptic or the supporter? The mocker or the molder? The ridiculer or the responder? The instigator or the insulator? Who do

you want to feed? The encourager feeds on large helpings of prayer and persistence.