

Why Do We Criticize?

The universal human tendency to criticize is corrosive and destructive, even to the critic. So why do we do it? And how can we train ourselves not to be so negative?

“But to what shall I liken this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their companions and saying: ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; We mourned to you, and you did not lament.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ But wisdom is justified by her children” (Matt. 11:16-19).



The generation to whom John the Baptist and Jesus preached could never be satisfied. John was an ascetic, too “weird” for cultured society. Jesus hobnobbed with low-lives, which discredited Him as a man of God in the eyes of the pious. No matter what approach God took with these people, they would find *something* to find fault with. Consequently, they were blind to the truth God was trying to bring into their lives.

Before we mock the Jews of that era for their foolishness, we would do well to reflect on our own penchant for criticizing. How often do we castigate our spouse, our kids, our co-workers, our politicians, or our brethren? Impersonal circumstances and events also draw our wrath: the weather, health issues, economic downturns,

mechanical breakdowns, or a thousand other little dramas that routinely intrude upon our lives. Some of us have developed our ability to criticize to a fine art. Even without using profanity, we can dissect a problem into a thousand pieces with remarkable precision. Of course, our grumbling doesn’t fix the problem—but at least we feel better about it.

Why do we do this? When it comes to denouncing others, *envy* often plays a role. If we can spot a defect in someone who is smarter, stronger, more popular, or better off than us, a well-aimed strike can even the score and elevate our status (or so we think).

Sometimes the bashing is driven by *a desire to shift attention away from our own flaws*. By highlighting everything that is broken around us, our own imperfections may appear less noticeable. In some cases, the defects we grouse about may even play a role in our own failures, which comes in handy: “See?! It’s not *my* fault!”

But one issue almost always lies at the root of a hypercritical personality: *pride*. Drawing attention to all the problems in the world around us makes us feel superior to the world. If everything were run the way *we* think it should be run, life would be so much better. Of course, we’re not in charge, so our role is reduced to one job: criticize. Arm-chair quarterbacks are always right, you know.

Chronic criticism is destructive. Nobody likes to be in the presence of someone who makes a living belittling everything and everyone around him. The greater damage is inflicted on the critic. His incessant harping on what’s wrong “out there” not only blinds him to the good that is in the world (which is considerable), it also gradually eats away at his ability to enjoy life. Every facet of his life becomes poisoned by his incessant harping on the negative.

So how can we get this bad habit under control?

First, we must address our pride problem. We must admit that we don’t know everything, and that often *we* are the ones who need fixing—or maybe educating. A stiff dose of humility will go a long way toward tempering our desire to criticize.

Second, we must train ourselves to recognize and applaud what is good in this world. Certainly, some things in life need to be criticized. But those critiques will be more effective if they come from someone who has earned a reputation as an encourager, a beacon of light who promotes good cheer in a dark world of negativity.

— David King