

May 23, 2021

“Listening to Criticism”  
Proverbs 15:31-33

FCF: Inability to hear criticism

**PROPOSITION:** (anchor) The gospel has implications for how we listen  
(magnet) to criticism.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

I don't know how many of you have had your wisdom teeth removed. I was recalling my own experience with that just recently. The recovery lasts a few days and is not fun. You really have to take care in treating those wounds and how you touch them. They can be quite sensitive.

Some people are like that - touchy, overly sensitive. You know you really have to watch what you say and walk on eggshells when you are around them so as not to set them off.

Of course, we can be like that too - touchy, overly sensitive. The gospel speaks to this.

**SCRIPTURE READING:** [Proverbs 15:31-33](#)**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION****SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

Paying attention, listening to messages, can save your life ([READ “Sea Gypsies...”](#)):

On December 26, 2004, the third-largest earthquake ever recorded by seismograph occurred deep beneath the Indian Ocean. It registered 9.1-magnitude on the Richter scale, and the shock waves produced tsunami waves more than one hundred feet in height, traveling five hundred miles per hour and reaching a radius of three thousand miles. This deadliest tsunami in history claimed 227,898 lives, but one people group living right in its path miraculously survived without a single casualty.

The Moken are an Austronesian ethnic group that live on the open seas from birth to death. Their handcrafted wooden boats, called kabang, function as houseboats for these sea gypsies. Moken children learn to swim before they learn to walk. They can see twice as clearly underwater as landlubbers. And if there were an underwater breath-holding contest, it would be no contest. But it wasn't any of these skills that saved them from the tsunami. What saved them was their intimacy with the ocean. The Moken know its moods and messages better than any oceanographer, reading ocean waves the way we read street signs.

On the day of the earthquake, an amateur photographer from Bangkok was taking pictures of the Moken when she became concerned by what she saw. As the sea started to recede, many of the Moken were crying. They knew what was about to happen. They recognized that the birds had stopped chirping, the cicadas had gone silent, the elephants were headed toward higher ground, and the dolphins were swimming farther out to sea.

The Moken listened that day. They paid attention to the signs around them and took that terrible news to heart. They didn't ignore or deny it. They listened. And that listening saved their lives.

Let's consider what it means to listen. Think back to the message last week from James 1. I've been reflecting a bit on that and I want to take some time to press into this a bit more over the next few weeks. For instance, what does it mean to listen to an unpleasant message from others about ourselves, news of how we have fallen short of a standard? What does it mean to listen to criticism? The gospel has implications for how we listen, even here, to criticism.

This comes out in our text in three helpful ways. First, in laying a biblical foundation. Second, in giving a biblical exhortation. And then, third, in offering a biblical implementation.

**I. THE FOUNDATION**

First, the gospel gives us the foundation, of why such listening is so very necessary.

*A) In Creation*

## 1. The nature of God

It begins with Creation and with the nature of God. He speaks. That's how things came to be. He speaks. And He hears. The God of all things hears, pays attention, and listens. He listens.

## 2. The image of God

And we are made in the image of this listening God. We were made to represent Him, to reflect Him in this world. God listens. So too are we. This is part of our design. We are made to listen.

### *B) In the Fall*

But we also need to listen. And this is clear as we consider not just Creation but the Fall.

#### 1. Radical depravity

Because of the Fall, we are radically depraved. We bear the guilt of Adam's first sin, the loss of righteousness, and the corruption of our entire nature. Our hearts are ever in rebellion against our rightful King in every way - in thought, word, and deed in both commission and omission.

#### 2. Self-deception

And we are self-deceived about this. We not only think better than we do. We also see ourselves as better than we are. And so we need the honest input of others (**READ Proverbs 15:31; 12:15**).

So we are not only made to listen but we desperately need to listen as well.

### *Illustration:*

I have a shirt with the logo, "Be the person your dog thinks you are." Dogs are great that way. Treat them well and you can do no wrong. But my dog doesn't have any insight into my heart. And frankly, quite often, neither do I. So I need the outside input of others who know me.

### *Application:*

But all of this is crazy talk in our culture today. Think of the messaging we hear. "Find yourself. Express yourself. Be true to yourself. You be you." Now that's fine if it's meant to call us to authenticity. But it often has a sense of deep dishonesty with no place for correction.

The gospel has implications for how we listen to criticism, laying the very foundation.

## **II. THE EXHORTATION**

Which brings us to the second point, the exhortation we find to listen to correction.

### *A) The Benefits*

#### 1. Protection from ourselves

There are obvious benefits here. Such listening can save and protect us from ourselves, preserve our relationships, check our foolishness (**READ Proverbs 15:32; 13:10; 17:10**). Real benefits.

#### 2. Expansion of counsel

There is also wisdom in getting a council of counsel (**READ Proverbs 11:14; 24:5-6**). More input, more viewpoints and counter-perspectives. There is protection in pushback, in criticism.

### *B) The Warnings*

#### 1. Implicit

So the Proverbs speak of benefits. But also warnings (**READ Proverbs 9:9**). The warning here is implicit as you think of what is lost without such listening, the terrible opportunity costs.

#### 2. Explicit

But others are explicit, a bit more obvious (**READ Proverbs 13:13; 15:32a**). Think about that.

The inability to take advice, to heed correction, to listen to a rebuke or criticism is the mark of the fool. And such a person will inevitably and perhaps tragically reap what they sow.

*Illustration:*

Alfred Poirier makes this point with a powerful illustration (**READ**):

On January 28, 1986, the space shuttle *Challenger* and its crew embarked on a mission to broaden educational horizons and promote the advancement of scientific knowledge. The most outstanding objective of the Challenger 51-L mission was the delivery of educational lessons from space by teacher Christa McAuliffe. A lesson was, indeed, delivered, but not one which anyone expected.

Just 75 seconds after liftoff, tragedy struck. Before a watching world the shuttle suddenly erupted overhead, disintegrating the cabin along with its crew. The debris of metal, blood and bones plummeted to earth, along with our nation's glory.

What had gone wrong? That was the pressing question everyone asked. As teams of researchers examined the wreckage, the specific cause was soon found. The problem was with the O-rings (circular rubber seals), which had been designed to fit snugly into the joints of the booster engine sections. Evidently, the O-rings had become defective under adverse conditions, and the resulting mechanical failure led to the tragedy. Was that the whole story?

The truth eventually got out. *The New York Times* put it frankly: the ultimate cause of the space shuttle disaster was pride. A group of top managers failed to listen carefully to the warnings, advice and criticisms given by those down the line who were concerned about the operational reliability of certain parts of the booster engine under conditions of abnormal stress. *Just think: heeding criticism could have saved seven human lives.*

*Application:*

Such warnings and exhortations need to be heard. We need to heed criticism. But that's not our default setting. Think of how we typically respond. Because of what someone has said, you know you've been misunderstood, misquoted, misjudged, or even falsely accused. Where then does your heart go? We get defensive. Our pulse rate picks up and our emotions heat up.

Why? It's not hard to see. These are not small things. We defend what we value. And in that moment, we believe that our honor, our name, our reputation is at stake. Those are not small things. And if no one is going to speak up and stand up for us, it's up to us. It's up to us. Right?

The gospel has implications for how we listen to criticism, giving us this exhortation.

### **III. THE IMPLEMENTATION**

Which bring us to the third point, the implementation. How can we become slow to rash responses, slow to defend ourselves and able to receive criticism? It has to do with humility.

#### *A) To Fear the LORD*

Note what we see in our text. It's all tied together (**READ Proverbs 15:31-33**).

##### 1. Explanation

The fear of the LORD is not distrustful terror but reverent awe. It is a true worshipful response of faith in which the LORD looms largest in our sight. That is what it means to fear Him.

##### 2. Effect

That is to live in wisdom and humility. We see God for who He is. And ourselves for who we are - the creature before the Creator, the sinner before the Judge, the redeemed before the Redeemer, the servant before the Master, the citizen before the King, the child before the Father.

#### *B) To Hear the LORD*

We grow in what it means to fear the LORD. And we learn what it is to hear the LORD as well. This takes us from the sage to the cross (**READ Galatians 2:20**). What is Paul saying?

## 1. Words of judgment

We need to hear these words of judgment. We need to see ourselves as sinners (**READ Galatians 3:10; Romans 3:10-18**). This is what made the cross necessary. Seeing Jesus on that cross, we hear a criticism that is more intense and thorough than anything anyone could ever speak of us.

## 2. Act of justification

To receive criticism well, we need to hear God's words of judgment. And then also to know His act of justification (**READ Romans 3:21-26**). By grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone we are now loved and accepted more intensely and thoroughly than we can imagine.

Holding these two together - judgment and justification - is how this implementation works. It's how we can receive criticism in a redemptive way and even count it as a blessing.

### *Application:*

This is how we can not only face criticism and endure it but even embrace it. This is how we can respond without bitterness, without blame-shifting, without that default defensiveness. For our default has been disrupted. The gospel enables us to say, "You don't know the half of it. I am far worse than you think and more loved than I know. So where you are right, I need to hear it. And where you are wrong, it just drives me to Jesus." This is far more helpful than just settling for "Haters gonna hate" and reaches far deeper than a thin "Just let it fuel you fire."

The gospel has implications for how we listen to criticism, offering the implementation.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Listening is a rare commodity. When people see it, they are drawn. Here's an example. Joe Rogan is host of the podcast, *The Joe Rogan Experience*. Rogan is a comedian-and-UFC-commentator-turned-podcast-host who has created a wildly popular show which has 190 million monthly downloads. He's difficult to pin down, all over the map with his views. Why is he so popular? Why do millions tune in to these three-hour episodes to hear Joe Rogan converse with authors, philosophers, politicians, and scientists? Why? He listens. Rod Dreher said (**READ**):

There's no doubt that my worldview doesn't align perfectly with Joe Rogan's, but what I enjoy about the show is that he comes across as a decent everyman who is curious about the world...I just want to hear intelligent conversation, especially if it challenges my way of thinking...Joe Rogan provides that. He has a definite point of view, but he seems to actually like people - all kinds of people. It says something about our time that this is so unusual in broadcasting.

Joe Rogan listens. He doesn't interrupt. He asks insightful questions. And he shows curiosity.

And so millions tune in. Again, listening draws people in. It gets their attention. It is a rare commodity. Listening to criticism is even more so. It's like finding a precious stone in one of those claw game machines at the mall. It's like finding a precious rare edition in a used book store, shelved amidst the romance novels. It doesn't just get people's attention. It demands it.

Ultimately, Christianity not only commands such listening but compels it, our listening to criticism. It lays the foundation, gives exhortation, and offers the one way of implementation.

The gospel has implications for how we listen, how we listen even to criticism.

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