

# How to Handle Criticism     Acts 23:1-11

## (Scripture Reading: Philippians 3:1-11)

### Introduction

I want to begin this morning by telling you a short story

An old man was taking a journey with his grandson.

They only had one small burro so the old man put the boy on the burro to ride as he walked along beside.

When they came to a village the people criticized saying, “Look at that able-bodied young man riding and making the old man walk. He obviously has no respect for his elders.”

The two travelers were bothered by the criticism so they switched places.

But when they arrived at the next village the people there criticized saying, “Look at that grown man riding and making a little boy walk. He obviously thinks very highly of himself.”

That criticism hit home as well so the old man hoisted his grandson up to sit in front of him and both rode on down the road until they came to the third village where the people said, “What a sad case of animal abuse; two healthy able-bodied people riding on one small burro!”

So, they both climbed off and walked along the road leading the donkey.

Arriving at the next village they heard the people laughing and mocking them, “Can you believe it? Two people walking when they have a perfectly good burro. You’d think one of them would have the good sense to ride.”

Their travel went rather more slowly after that as the old man and the boy staggered down the road carrying the burro toward their destination.

### People are going to criticize you no matter what you do

That’s especially true today as we find ourselves living in a culture of criticism and manufactured outrage

It seems that people today are not just waiting to be offended but actually actively looking for reasons to find fault

There is very little if any mercy shown these days

What used to be recognized as minor slip-ups to be overlooked and accepted as part of the human condition are now made into full-blown scandals as everyone seems to have forgotten that they’ve also failed at some point or other

### Criticism is especially to be expected if one is a Christ-follower

The most likely label to be affixed to Christians is that of “hypocrite” as the world watches anyone who claims to be a Christian very carefully to see if their walk matches their talk

Sadly, “hypocrite” is a label we far too often deserve –

But that criticism isn’t always accurate as we will see today that failure to adhere to a stated standard is not always hypocrisy

But whether it is deserved or not, **criticism from others** still stings and our first instinct is often to defend ourselves which can cause us to act unwisely

However, the most damaging criticism can be when we wrongly **criticize ourselves**

We should certainly evaluate our thoughts, emotions, words, and deeds but there is a right way and a wrong way to go about that self-evaluation

And allowing ourselves to be wrongly critical of ourselves can lead to paralysis when we fall short of the perfection we desire and then fail to show ourselves the mercy we deserve

## **Today, we are looking at Acts 23:1-11 where we see Paul brought before the Sanhedrin for examination**

In this account we will see through Paul's example, both positive and negative, how we might also handle criticism

### ***Review of the situation***

Paul's time in Jerusalem up to this point had been somewhat up and down and actually more down than up

He arrived to a warm welcome and rejoiced along with the church leadership over the work God was doing among the Gentiles in distant places and the Jews in Jerusalem

But the good feelings were short-lived as James revealed that the Jewish Christians were upset over reports that Paul was teaching against the Mosaic Law and encouraging the Jews who lived among the Gentiles to ignore Jewish cultural practices

Of course, this was a false rumor but nonetheless Paul agreed to pour oil on troubled waters by sponsoring four men who were under a vow before God thereby showing his support for the Law

And in the course of fulfilling that obligation Paul was further accused by some Jews from Asia of bringing a Gentile into the inner court of the temple which was forbidden and punishable by death

As word got out many of the Jews rushed to drag Paul out of the temple and proceeded to beat him with the intention of beating him to death

The commander of the Roman garrison stationed there rushed in with troops, arrested Paul, and unable to get a straight answer from the mob, hauled him off to the barracks for safe-keeping until he was able to sort out the reason for the uproar

When they arrived at the barracks Paul asked for the opportunity to address his countrymen and his speech to them pacified them at first but ultimately riled them up again as soon as he mentioned the word "Gentiles"

So the Roman tribune decided to examine Paul by flogging in order to get to the bottom of the matter only to be spared from breaking Roman law by Paul's timely revelation of his citizenship

It's not hard to imagine how frustrated the Roman commander must have been at this point

He had an unseemly uprising for which he couldn't determine a cause and a prisoner whom he didn't know how to properly deal with

Paul was under arrest but as yet the commander had now reason for having arrested a Roman citizen and he was desperate to determine what if any charges could be levied against Paul

### ***The Sanhedrin***

In the last verse of chapter 22 (**Acts 22:30**) we see that the tribune commanded the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, to meet for the purpose of examining Paul

By this examination the tribune hoped to find out whether Paul was guilty of a religious charge only which would mean he could wash his hands of the whole affair and turn Paul over to the Jewish authorities for trial

Or whether Paul was guilty of violating Roman law whereby he would take Paul from the Jews and deal with him in the Roman justice system

Either way, the tribune was seeking to have a clear direction by the end of the examination

**But as we will see it didn't exactly go according to plan...**

Please join me in Acts 23 and follow along as I read verses 1-11 (**Acts 23:1-11**)

*And looking intently at the council, Paul said, “Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day.” **2**And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. **3**Then Paul said to him, “God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?” **4**Those who stood by said, “Would you revile God’s high priest?” **5**And Paul said, “I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, ‘You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.’”*

***6**Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.” **7**And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. **8**For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. **9**Then a great clamor arose, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees’ party stood up and contended sharply, “We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?” **10**And when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks.*

***11**The following night the Lord stood by him and said, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.”*

**We want to notice in verse 1 that Paul first stated that he his conscience was clear before God**

## **I. Safeguard Your Integrity**

We also must **safeguard our integrity** if we are going to effectively handle criticism

As we consider this point we need to understand what Paul meant when he said, *“I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day”*

Conscience is that sense we have that measures our fidelity to a set of moral standards or scruples

So for conscience to be affected there must be a conscious awareness of the standard and one’s behavior in relation to that standard

Paul was well aware of what kind of man he had been before he was saved

He had just revealed to the mob that he had been so zealous for God that he had tried to wipe out the fledgling church

According to Paul’s testimony in **Acts 22:4**, he had *“persecuted this Way to the death binding and delivering to prison both men and women”*

And he had earlier admitted approving of and enthusiastically cheering on the stoning of Stephen when he was accused of blasphemy for speaking of the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth and claiming that Jesus was the Messiah

How could a man who had committed such heinous acts ever say that he had a “good conscience” before God?

**First of all, Paul was well aware of his sinful actions as an unbeliever**

But he also knew that in everything he had acted in accordance with what he believed – he was doing the best he could according to the knowledge he had

Look with me at what Paul wrote in **1Timothy 1:13** – *“...formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief.”*

Paul knew the kind of man he had been but he also knew that he had acted according to what he knew and that God had forgiven him for acting according to his unbelief

**Paul also admitted that his life since becoming a believer had been a constant struggle for integrity**  
He delineated that struggle common for all believers in **Romans 7:15-20**

But he also showed that victory in that struggle is given through Christ in **Romans 8:1-6**

**But since being saved Paul had endeavored to live as a Christian through a renewed mind and clear conscience**

Look with me at **2Timothy 1:3** where Paul writes, *"I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day."*

We should also accept that Paul lived according to the instruction that he gave to his readers in Romans 12:1-2 –

*"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."*

And the author of Hebrews shows us how it is possible to have your conscience cleansed by the blood of Christ in **Hebrews 9:13-14** –

*For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.*

**Paul didn't claim that he had lived a life of sinless perfection but that he had done his best to live a life true to the standard of morality that he was convinced of and when he failed to measure up he did his best to make it right without delay**

And we will see this vividly demonstrated in the events that quickly transpired as a result of Paul's very brief opening statement

The high priest who was presiding over this gathering of the Sanhedrin was a man named **Ananias** who was known to be a ruthless and greedy man

The Jewish historian Josephus reports that Ananias was even guilty of taking for himself the tithes that rightly belonged to the common priests causing some of them to die from neglect – he was not a godly man at all

And Paul's opening sentence so offended Ananias for some reason that he ordered a man standing next to Paul to *"strike him on the mouth"*

I don't know about you but I don't think I would have taken getting hit in the mouth very well even if I deserved it much less if I didn't so I understand why Paul reacted the way he did – even though Paul was wrong in doing so

Paul reacted to being hit the way many of us might as he lashed out at the high priest calling him a hypocrite for breaking the very law by which he was judging Paul

Jewish law was very clear that an individual could not be punished without first being convicted and here was Paul, not even formally accused of any crime, being struck in the mouth merely for saying something Ananias didn't like

So Paul called him a hypocrite and pronounced a curse against him that God would strike him for his actions

Paul didn't know just how prophetic his words were going to be as Ananias was hunted down and murdered by a rebellious mob in AD66

As understandable and accurate as Paul's response was, it was also wrong because Paul also violated God's law by speaking in such a way to the high priest

Paul didn't exactly try to excuse why he acted as he did but he did offer an explanation in verse 5 where he says,

*"I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest"*

### ***What is meant by “I did not know...”***

Biblical scholars have tried valiantly to explain how it might possibly be that Paul didn't recognize Ananias

Some say perhaps Ananias wasn't dressed in his formal garb because this was a hastily called meeting

Others say that perhaps Paul's poor eyesight kept him from clearly seeing the people present

Yet **verse 1** tells us that Paul looked at the council “intently” which means he looked them over very well

The same word is used of the disciples gazing into heaven after Jesus ascended out of sight

And Paul had formerly been a member of the Sanhedrin so it would seem he would be aware of the seating arrangement and procedures

Still others say that perhaps Paul was speaking with a bit of sarcasm and meant that there was no way that he would recognize someone who acted like Ananias had just done as being the high priest

But that would seem to negate Paul's apology and even be another violation of speaking negatively against the high priest

And it really isn't necessary to go through any kind of contortions here when a very plausible explanation is that Paul meant he hadn't taken the time to consider who he was addressing

It seems to me to be perfectly understandable to say that Paul was angry and he blurted out the insult and the curse before taking control of his tongue

In his letter, James talks about the difficulty of taming the tongue and why would we think that Paul wouldn't fall prey to his tongue from time to time – especially after getting hit in the mouth!

### ***What is important is what Paul did next***

What is truly important is what Paul did once he came to his senses

He went to the Bible as he quoted from **Exodus 22:28** showing that he recognized and was sorry for his error

Paul had been angry but now he was suddenly humble and in his humility he accepted his error and sought to make it right by submitting himself to Ananias' authority

### ***And that is the key to having a good conscience***

If we think the only way to have a good conscience is to be perfect and to never violate the biblical standard then we are without hope of ever having one and our critics are right – we're just a bunch of hypocrites

Not that that living according to God's Word perfectly shouldn't be our goal but no believer has ever lived a perfect life – certainly not before salvation and not afterwards either

If someone digs around long enough or even just follows us around long enough they will see us do or say something that goes against what we declare to be morally right

So it's not a matter of living a perfect life but of making sure that we deal with our failures in the proper way

When criticized our typical first response is to spring to our own defense, to protest, and explain our offense away

Lloyd Ogilvie said, “It's not our mistakes that do us in; it's our pride that keeps us from admitting them.”

We would be better served by listening to the criticism, checking it for validity, and weighing our action against God's Word

And if we find that we have erred we need to be even quicker and more diligent about making admitting, apologizing, and doing all we can to make things right than we would about defending ourselves

Again, Paul didn't claim to have lived a faultless life but rather a life of integrity in which he strived for fidelity to God's standard and that when his conscience pricked him he acted quickly and decisively to correct his error

So Paul could state that he had a “good conscience” before God because he was aware of having left nothing amiss in his life up to that day

**If we follow his example in this we too will safeguard our integrity**

## **II. Stick to What's Important**

The next thing we see Paul do in our passage that will help us handle criticism is **sticking to what's important**

In **verse 6** we see Paul continue with what he had come to say –

“Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.”

And just as when he said the word, “Gentiles” to the mob his mention of the resurrection of the dead caused problems

The council or the Sanhedrin was the ruling body of the Jews and it was made up of two sects, the Sadducees and the Pharisees

### ***The Sadducees***

Those who belonged to the party of the Sadducees were the priestly class and the lay leaders of Judaism – the Jewish aristocracy – and they made up the majority of the Sanhedrin

The Sadducees denied the existence of the spirit world in general – in other words they didn't believe in angels, demons, or any other spirit beings and they denied the possibility of life after death

In other words, they categorically denied the possibility of the resurrection of the dead

### ***The Pharisees***

The Pharisees were laymen who were experts in the Scriptures and the Mosaic Law

They were the rule followers who were committed to ritual purity and right living

The Pharisees were generally approachable and were respected by the people so they served as a kind of liaison or go-between between the masses and the aristocracy

The Pharisees also believed in the spirit world and in life after death – they believed that there was an intermediate state after death where a person existed as an “angel” or a “spirit” and then an eventual, final resurrection from the dead

Of course this put them at odds with the Sadducees and they often argued and debated the matter which they proceeded to do on this day as soon as Paul mentioned the resurrection

### ***Why did Paul mention the resurrection?***

One possibility biblical scholars mention for Paul having mentioned the resurrection is that is that he did so just to cause a ruckus that would take the focus off of him

Perhaps, they say, he saw from the response of Ananias to his innocuous opening statement that there was no way that he was going to be treated fairly so he had to end the examination or trial any way he could

While we can't say with any certainty what other reasons may have been in Paul's mind we can say that the resurrection was the key issue dividing Judaism from Christianity – in fact it remains the key issue

Paul could have allowed the examination to go according to the Sanhedrin's agenda and let them ask their questions and make their accusations and gotten lost in a cycle of defending himself against their charges

**But Paul brought the core issue of the resurrection to the forefront of the discussion because it was the issue on which everything hung**

Paul was indeed raised as a Pharisee, the son of Pharisees and it was at that time still possible for him to claim to still be a Pharisee because being a Christian and a Pharisee were not incompatible

The Pharisees really had no problem with the idea that Paul had met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus

Notice in **verse 9** how they follow Gamaliel's tactic of being strategically careful not to go against God by asking, "What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?" meaning Jesus in spirit form

I think there is a distinct possibility that this type of thinking was in the minds of the disciples when God sent an angel to rescue Peter who was in jail awaiting execution and when Peter came knocking they told the servant girl that it was probably Peter's angel

But, in any event, the Pharisees didn't rule out the possibility that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead and therefore weren't far from being able to connect the dots and be saved

I don't believe that Paul was simply being a rabble rouser

I believe he knew that the resurrection of Jesus was the most important issue and the hinge on which everything turned so he focused on it rather than on the lesser matters that the Sanhedrin might have wanted to investigate

### **We too would do well to stick to what's truly important**

I think sometimes, as Christians, we get involved in arguments and disputes with unbelievers that we would be better off leaving alone

Why would we ever expect an unbeliever to live according to a biblical standard?

Why do we get all worked up and rail against their obvious disregard for spiritual matters when they don't believe in them in the first place?

God hasn't given us the job of straightening out the social ills of our nation or the world – he has sent us to continue the mission that Jesus began

Our job is to be witnesses of Jesus and to present the gospel; to make disciples in our locality and around the world

It is only as we are faithful to **that calling** and **that mission** that we will see people saved and living like God would have them live as they receive the indwelling Holy Spirit and strive to become more like the Son

But when we focus on finding fault and pointing out the evils of society we cause those who are perishing to defend themselves and to lash out at us by pointing out all of our failures to walk as we talk

### **We would face a lot less criticism if we simply stuck to what's important as Paul did**

## **III. Celebrate Your Invincibility**

The final thing we see in our passage that we can do to help us handle criticism is **celebrate our invincibility**

We aren't told in a direct way what Paul was feeling on the night referred to in **verse 11** but he must have been low

He had been thoroughly convinced that God had sent him to Jerusalem even as others warned him not to go

And since he had arrived he had experienced one disappointment after another

He was **wrongly accused** concerning his beliefs and his teaching, he had been **beaten and pursued by an angry mob**, he **had a big opportunity** to share the gospel with the mob only to inflame them with his mention of the Gentiles, he was **almost scourged** by the Roman soldiers only to escape the torture at the very last moment, he had a golden opportunity to **present the gospel to the Sanhedrin** only it too had blown up in his face and Paul may well have been thinking it was all his fault because **he hadn't controlled his tongue**, and **now he was in Roman custody** waiting to see what his fate would be as he wound his way through the Roman legal system

His trip to Jerusalem can't have gone as he had imagined it would when he arrived and he had to have been emotionally spent – **and it was at that moment that the Lord came to visit** – look with me again at **verse 11**

*The following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome."*

This appears to have been an actual, physical appearance of the Lord with Paul as he lay on his bed

Paul had been rescued from some serious predicaments before but this time the Lord joined Paul in his jail cell

We often pray only to be delivered out of our trials when perhaps the will of the Lord is that we open ourselves up to him meeting with us in the midst of whatever we're facing and rather than praying for immediate rescue we would be better off praying for the Lord to reveal himself in the difficulty

Notice the Lord's first words to Paul as he joined him in his cell – *"Take courage"*

The Lord in essence told Paul to cheer up and have confidence in the face of his difficult circumstance and the fact that the Lord saw fit to encourage Paul tells us that Paul needed to be encouraged

We often face our greatest doubts in the night when we are alone when our reserves of energy, emotion, and confidence are at their lowest point

The enemy loves to see God's children at this low point and will do everything to keep us there and even to speed our downward slide into despair

But Jesus arrived alongside Paul to encourage him and to show him that he was pleased with his witness

Paul may well have been discouraged by the results of his Jerusalem witness and feeling low because of the lack of good results from it – Who wouldn't be?

But it's important to remember that results are not the believer's responsibility

Paul, like us, was responsible only for witnessing and Paul had done his part faithfully

### ***Paul's reward***

And the Lord showed Paul that the reward for acting faithfully is the opportunity to act faithfully again

Paul was going to witness in Rome – the Lord told him that he *must* also witness in Rome – it was guaranteed

### **Paul was reminded by Jesus that he was unstoppable for as long as God wanted him to continue**

We have the benefit of knowing the rest of the account of Paul's journey to Rome and we know that he is going to face all manner of hardship on the way and after he arrives

And we have to think that the Lord's promise to him during this nighttime visit served as an encouragement again and again as he faced those trials

We too would do well when facing criticism to realize that God loves us and we are in his care

And that we are immortal until the time he has set for our lives is over

### **We just need to keep moving and working and living in a way that brings him honor and glory and celebrate our invincibility with the Lord at our side**

## **Conclusion**

As Christ-followers we are going to be criticized – you may as well mark it down as fact – it goes with the territory

In order to handle that criticism we need to make sure to safeguard our integrity by doing everything we can to live a life that is faithful to the biblical standard we preach and own our errors by apologizing and making amends when we fail to live up to the biblical standard

We need to focus on what's important and take away many of the opportunities for criticism we open ourselves up to when we don't

And, in the final analysis, we need to recognize that criticism isn't fatal and we are invincible as long as God wants us on this earth and we have a job to do while we're here

Let's pray