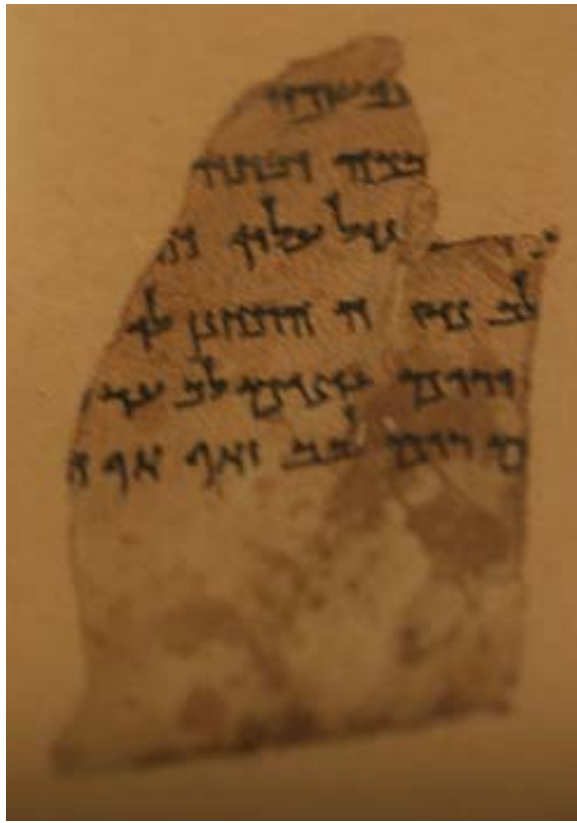


The Covenant Pulpit



EXODUS

Possessing the Promises

“CRITICISM”
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Fifteen-year-old Phoebe was one of the most popular girls at South Hadley High. Within weeks after she emigrated with her family from Ireland she was dating the star of the football team. A few months later she was going out with the most popular senior.

It's no wonder. Phoebe was a pretty girl with a Mona Lisa smile. The Irish lilt to her voice made her even more irresistible. But it wasn't long before the teen queen bees at Hadley High were seething with jealousy and came after this Irish interloper with a vengeance that has since shocked America.

Their slander turned Phoebe into a social outcast. But that wasn't enough for these "mean girls". They launched a relentless campaign of cyberbullying, flooding her email with hate speech. They twittered and texted her ugly messages and called her cruel names on her Facebook. On January 14th a carload of "mean girls" drove along side her, screaming taunts and throwing bottles at her. She ran into her house and hanged herself.

Her Massachusetts community was shocked that a young girl could be tormented to death right under their nose. *Boston Globe* columnist Kevin Cullen coined a new phrase when he said that the "mean girls" were guilty of *cybercide*. The District Attorney charged them with harassment, claiming that their bullying pushed Phoebe over the edge.

This *cybercide* has spawned outrage across America. It has also sparked a legal debate: are people liable if their cyberbullying drives someone to commit suicide? The *New York Times Bloggerhead* recently interviewed Ann Althouse of the University of Wisconsin Law School. Ms. Althouse argues that criminalization of cyberbullying is a slippery slope:

"If you commit murder, you can't say, 'That person made my life a living hell and I was driven to do it.' You are still guilty of murder. The fact that they made your life difficult doesn't change the fact that you did the killing. In the same way, if someone takes their own life, that person made the decision to kill them self. Though people may have made life a living hell for the victim, they cannot be held legally liable for the decision of that person to commit suicide."

Ms. Althouse may be right when it comes to legal liability. But a question remains. It's as old as Cain's question in Genesis 4:9: "Am I my brother's keeper?" Even if my brothers and sisters are as fragile as Phoebe Prince, am I *morally* culpable for what my words drive them to do? Though I may not be liable before an earthly court, will I have to answer before heaven's bar?

The half-brother of Jesus wrote in James 3:8, "The tongue is a restless evil, full of deadly poison." Jesus talks about a man in hell who begs for a drop of water to soothe his pain. It's intriguing that he asks that it be placed on his tongue. Is Jesus saying that the body part which torments others most on earth will itself experience the most torment in hell?

The tongue is deadliest when criticizing. How many children have been warped by it? How many marriages have been ruined? How many careers have been lost? How many friendships destroyed? How many churches split? How many Phoebes driven over the edge?

The wisest man who ever lived said in Proverbs 18:21, "For the power of life and death are in the tongue." We *are* responsible for our words. Jesus warns us in Matthew 12:36, "But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken." Those "mean girls" at South Hadley High *will* stand before God and answer for Phoebe. But, will we not also answer for our cruel and careless words?

We had better learn how to deal with this thing called criticism. Surely Moses knew the pain of criticism. He was bullied by it every day for 40 years. Other than Jesus, no one ever handled it better than Moses. If we are not going to destroy others by our critical words, or be debilitated by the criticism of others, we need to learn from him the 13th principle for those who want to finish well the journey to their Promised Land:

**Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary
as it calls attention to an unhealthy state of things.**

Take what happened in Hadley. The venom that spewed from the "mean girls" exposed their festering hearts. Phoebe's frantic cries for help revealed her fragile heart. But those watching missed the unhealthy state of things. School officials dismissed the bullying as typical teenage stuff. Parents sloughed it off as "Kids will be kids." The latest issue of *Time* magazine repeatedly asks, "Why didn't adults take action to avert the tragedy? Indignant second-guessers across America are asking the same question.

It's easy to judge the officials at South Hadley High for doing nothing. But the truth is: all of us listen to and spew verbal venom every day. From judging contestants on *American Idol* to screaming at referees to forwarding emails mocking our president's performance—criticizing others is a national pastime. From the water cooler at work to the coffee hour at church to cable news before bedtime, we participate in whining and complaining 24/7.

Like the folks in Hadley, we don't even grasp the unhealthy state of things taking place right under our nose. So here's the deal: we need to evaluate how we deliver and receive criticism in order to measure our spiritual state. As we watch criticism swirl about Moses, we get answers to three questions:

1. How do we give constructive criticism?

May I introduce you to one of the original "mean girls"? Her name is Miriam. She's the older sister of Moses. And she is as jealous of him as the "mean girls" of South Hadley High were of Phoebe Prince. So she enlists Aaron in an attack against Moses. We read in Numbers 12:1&2, "Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he

had married a Cushite. 'Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?' they asked. 'Hasn't he also spoken through us?' And the Lord heard this."

It's a good thing that the Internet or Facebook hadn't been invented by 1400 BC, or that "mean girl" could have done some serious damage. As it was, only one thing matters and it is recorded at the end of verse two: "And the Lord heard..." We are careless with our words, not even giving them a second thought. Ben Franklin said, "Any fool can criticize and complain, and most fools do." We shrug and say, "No harm, no foul." We even forget our words that wounded others. But God hears. Nothing we say is insignificant to him. And, he never forgets. So what's our takeaway?

1) We need to beware of an *addiction* to criticizing.

Miriam and Aaron were shaped in a culture of criticism. Three verbs are repeated with nauseating regularity to describe the Israelites throughout the Exodus: "grumbling...complaining...murmuring." You see it just a few verses before in Numbers 11:4-6:

"The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna.'

In 1 Corinthians 19:9&10 Rabbi Paul said that the paramount sin in Israeli history was complaining. When we study Jewish history, we see two reasons why: 1. **People who suffer most can become most critical.** No one ever suffered more than the Jews. For 400 years they were slaves in Egypt. Having been abused, they distrusted authority. After years of deprivation, they became negative and fearful. After centuries of figuring God had abandoned them, they found it difficult to trust him again.

A critical spirit had become part of their collective psyche. I'm not apologizing for the followers of Moses, but asking you to understand them. I'm also asking you to watch out if you have gone through tough times. Betrayal can make you bitter. Suffering will cause you to be skeptical. The abused distrust those in authority. The poor resent the prosperous. Losers are jealous of winners. Bad times give birth to a critical spirit.

On the other end of the spectrum, 2) **People who have been blessed most can become most critical.** No folks were blessed more than those Jews. They walked through seas on dried land, drank from waters flowing out of desert rocks, ate the bread of heaven, and witnessed spectacular miracles. Yet, the more people receive the more dissatisfied they become. Beware if you are enjoying the good life. Prosperity breeds pomposity. Attractiveness breeds arrogance. Being in a superior position breeds a sense of superiority. Being served breeds feelings of entitlement. Good times are also a recipe for a critical spirit. A recent issue of *Business Week* magazine presented a study

of British University of Leicester that ranked the world's happiest nations. Though America is the richest nation in history, it only ranked 23rd in contentment. Conversely, Zimbabwe, the poorest country on earth, ranked at the bottom of the 173 nations. The survey found that the wealthiest and poorest nation on earth both lacked contentment. Both ranked at the top when it came to a complaints and criticisms about life. Like Miriam and Aaron, we are prone to criticism. The first step to getting over it is to admit we are children of a culture of criticism. It is our nature to be critical. We have to fight to overcome it.

2) We need to be *upfront* in our criticisms.

Notice a key word in verse one: "Moses and Aaron began to talk *against* Moses." But they should have talked *to* or *with* Moses. Instead, they went behind his back and talked *against* him to others. They chose gossip over godly confrontation. Jesus commands us in Matthew 18:15, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you." There is only one legitimate reason to criticize, and that is to help the other person get better. Abraham Lincoln said, "He has a right to criticize who has a heart to help." Jesus is clear: "...go and show *him* his fault, *just between the two of you.*" It is never helpful to show *others* his faults. It only corrupts others, and never helps the one we're talking about. Let's be brutally frank: Gossip is the way of the coward.

3) We need to be *honest* in our criticisms.

What was Miriam and Aaron *really* upset about? Verse one says they, "...began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite." The Hebrew sentence structure is very emphatic: they didn't like her because of her race. When Moses was a fugitive in the Sinai, he had married Zipporah, a woman of a nomadic tribe called Midianites. These descendants of Noah's son Cush had migrated to the Sinai from Africa. Zipporah was a black woman, and Miriam and Aaron were racists who resented this woman of color who had married into their family.

But they had to mask their dirty little secret. After all, Miriam was a prophetess and Aaron was the High Priest. So they piously say in verse two, "Has the Lord only spoken through Moses? Hasn't he also spoken through us?" They are saying, "Moses is hogging the limelight. He's not giving other people the opportunity to use their spiritual gifts." I can't tell you how often I've heard this criticism in the church. But Miriam and Aaron are blatantly dishonest. They are wrapping their racism in a pious protest. God's people are very skilled at putting a religious mask on their carnality. Be careful before you criticize others. You may be deceiving yourself.

4) We need to be *gentle* with our criticisms.

Miriam and Aaron are as brutal as the "mean girls" of South Hadley High. In verse eight, God rebukes them: "Were you not afraid to *speak against* my

servant, Moses?" The Hebrew phrase "to speak against" has the sense of a no-holds-barred attack. Marian and Aaron are not only vicious, they are arrogant: "Hasn't God also spoken through us?" In other words, "Aren't our prophetic gifts as good as his?" God is quick to cut them down to size. He says in verse six that he speaks to run-of-the-mill prophets in dreams and visions. But he says of Moses in verse eight: "With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord." In short, God is saying to Miriam and Aaron, "I know Moses. And you are no Moses."

In Galatians 6:1 St. Paul warns us, "Brothers, if someone is caught in sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself or you also may be tempted." Before you go criticize someone else: one, **make sure the other person is really in sin**; two, **make sure you are truly spiritual**; three, **do it with gentle spirit**; and four, **watch out for pride**. Otherwise, keep it to yourself. Frank A. Clark writes, "Criticism, like the rain, should be gentle enough to nourish a man's growth without destroying his roots."

5) We need to be *careful* when we criticize.

Look again at verse eight, "Were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" The key phrase is "*my* servant." In Psalm 105:15 God says, "Touch not *my* anointed." The *anointed* are those set apart by God to be in authority over us: parents, pastors, and presidents. You may not always approve of what they do, but you are to pray for them and honor them because God put them in their position. We live in a culture where it is open season on everyone in authority. From comedians to radio talk hosts to the emails we forward, we take cheap shots at those God has placed over us. I'm not saying that we can't disagree, and even vote them out of office. But shouldn't we tread carefully when we criticize and trivialize people who have been placed there by God?

It was Winston Churchill who said, "Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfills the same function as pain in the human body. It calls attention to an unhealthy state of things." Sometimes it says more about us than the people we are criticizing.

2. How should we receive criticism?

Though the "mean girls" of South Hadley High revealed a festering hearts in through their ungodly criticism, Phoebe's response to criticism showed that her heart was fatally fragile. Moses' response to the bullying of Miriam and Aaron showed the greatness of his heart. Here's what we learn from it:

1) We don't have to defend ourselves.

Notice the silence of Moses. He never responds to the criticism. I think there are three reasons: 1) **He knows that it goes with the territory**. At first, Moses came unglued every time the people attacked him. But after 30 years of being criticized, he's finally made peace with being unpopular. It was

Aristotle who famously said, "If you want to avoid criticism you just have to do nothing, say nothing, and be nothing." 2) **Years of criticism have shaped his character.** He says nothing to defend himself, but God says in verse three, "Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth." Moses wasn't always humble. When he was the Prince of Egypt, he killed a man in a fit of rage. Early in the Exodus, he beat on a rock in a fit of rage. But years later, he is the most humble man on the planet. What changed him? I like what actor Paul Newman said: "If you get enemies, you will get character." 3) **He knew that only God's opinion really matters.** Miriam and Aaron accused him of spiritual pride. But God said that he was the humblest man on earth. We worry too much about our reputations. Bill Gothard says: "Reputation is what other people say about you. Character is what God knows about you."

2) We should listen for what we can learn.

If Moses didn't speak, we should assume that he listened. James 1:19 says, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry." It is not easy to listen to criticism, especially if it is delivered in a godless manner. We often use the bad way people criticize us as an excuse to not listen. The truth is: it's never easy to hear criticism even if godly. The famous writer and observer of human nature, Somerset Maugham put it this way: "People ask for criticism, but they only want praise." Remember our 13th principle for the Exodus: **Criticism my not be agreeable, but it is necessary as it calls attention to an unhealthy state of things.** You might protest, "But there was nothing wrong with Moses! Their criticism was bogus." But Moses still had to listen. Remember, what we learned in our last episode of Exodus: it's not just about us. The criticism directed at us may be revealing more about the criticizer's problem than our own. Our concern should be their healing, not our pain at being falsely accused.

3) We should give *total forgiveness* to our false accusers.

One of the reasons Moses can remain humble in the face of this vicious attack, is that he trusts God to fight his battles for him. God will never stand by idly and watch his anointed one take it on the chin. If you belong to God, you never have to defend yourself. Jesus said that you can even turn the other cheek. God comes down hard on that "mean girl" Miriam. Verse ten says that she was stricken with leprosy. But Moses takes no delight in God's judgment on the sister who had viciously slandered him. He pleads with his LORD in verse 13, "O God, please heal her." Sometimes we begrudgingly offer forgiveness to those who have destroyed our reputations or wounded our hearts with their unkind words, but we have not given *total* forgiveness until we pray for God to bless them. Until we can do that, we have not yet been transformed into the likeness of Christ who said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be sons of your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:44&45)

3. How does God respond to godless criticism?

The answer is short and scary: **with holy anger!** Aaron and Miriam are brought before the Lord. Verse nine says, "The anger of the Lord burned against them, and he left them." The most terrible thing of all is for the Lord to leave us. In the Old Testament, when God left the temple, the word *Icabod* was placed over it. *Icabod* is a combination of Hebrew words which literally means: "the glory has departed." How many churches have *Icabod* written across their doors? How many Christians have it written across their hearts? God's glory does not reside in the critic, the faultfinder, complainer, whiner, gossip, or slanderer. In Proverbs 6:17-19, we are told that there are six things the Lord hates, but a seventh that he detests. What is the seventh thing that he detests most? Proverbs 6:19 says, "...a man who stirs up dissention among brothers." That's what Miriam and Aaron did. God's glory can never be among his people when they are fighting amongst themselves.

When his glory departs, Miriam is covered with leprosy. Why isn't Aaron afflicted with the same thing? The only thing I can figure is that Miriam was the instigator of the attack on Moses. In verse one, Miriam is mentioned before Aaron to make a statement: she was the leader in the attack. God's justice is poetic in its perfection. She resented the black woman's skin color, and now her skin is covered with leprosy. She tried to push Zipporah out of the family, and now she is ostracized in quarantine outside the camp. She attempted to shame Moses, but now she is an object of shame. She aimed to bring Moses down, and now she has been brought low. Indeed the words of Scripture have come true for Miriam and her scared-to-death brother Aaron: "Pride comes before a fall." Has anyone ever illustrated more graphically the modern proverb: "What goes 'round comes 'round."? The next time I set out to criticize someone, I want to remember Miriam.

But God also **heals with gracious mercy.** God's punishment is severe but it isn't forever. In verse 14 he says, "Confine her outside the camp seven days, and after that she can be brought back." Why does she get to come back? What is our hope when we are under judgment for our careless and cruel tongues? It is the fact that another one also went outside the camp. In Miriam, I see a picture of Jesus. Though he never said a cruel or careless thing in his life, he was dragged outside the city of Jerusalem. He was separated from God's people. He was taken to a pile of rocks in a garbage dump where lepers picked through the trash. He was nailed to a Cross and took on all our sins. He literally became sin, as surely as Miriam became leprous. He was rejected and shamed. All of that, he suffered so that Miriam and all "mean girls" and Phoebes and the rest of us festering and fragile folk could find healing and be restored to God and his people. Only in his grace is there forgiveness and healing. Only then will the God who hears forget every careless and cruel word we have ever said. Only at the cross can we forgive others in the same way!