

Putting The Pastor In His Place

How To Effectively And Biblically Critique Your Pastor

“Pastor, I have some concerns to talk to you about.” Every pastor dreads hearing conversations that begin this way. It’s not that pastors are necessarily against critique, but the way some criticize their pastors can be unbiblical, unkind, and, frankly, unhelpful.

To be sure, some pastors believe they can do no wrong. Others act as if it is never the job of the church people to criticize their actions, often quoting Old Testament scriptures about not touching the Lord’s anointed,¹ as if that shields them from transparency. Both of these beliefs are false. Though pastors are called by God, they are not God. They are human, prone to sin and mistake, and are still a body part of the church they pastor. Church members who approach their pastors in healthy and helpful ways can be a great blessing to a pastor. After all, Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, wrote, “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel.”²

The Bible is clear that criticizing your pastor is very serious and is not to be taken lightly or carelessly. First, your pastor is not your boss, your co-worker, an employee of the church or evenly simply a friend. He is called by God to be your shepherd. As such, God expects you to treat him with respect. The Bible says as much when Paul writes, “The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.”³

Second, your pastor loves you. You are not critiquing a machine or someone who is just doing their job. You are critiquing a person who could be doing something else, who spends his time, energy, resources, and heart on you. Pastors sacrifice their family time, finances, and often health to invest in your life. His greatest joy in ministry is your growth. The apostle John agrees with this sentiment when he writes, “I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.”⁴

So how should a person approach the pastor if there are concerns about him or his actions? This article will give six suggestions for approaching the pastor in a way that is helpful and healthy, showing respect but also taking the concerns seriously.

1. Check Your Heart

Jesus taught that we are to always examine ourselves before we presume to call the actions of others into question. If our heart is wrong, we are wrong no matter how right our critique may be. He said, “You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.”⁵

Before you speak to your pastor, make sure you are doing so with the right attitude and for the right reasons. Is your concern rooted in scripture or your own opinion? Are you holding him to a standard that you do not hold yourself to? Is it possible that you are in the wrong and would you allow him to point that out? Before you criticize your pastor’s actions, pray and ask God to reveal your own heart and then be willing to be challenged yourself.

2. Have Realistic Expectations

Many times, the reason people are disappointed or upset with their pastor is because they feel let down. His sermons aren’t as good as so and so. He didn’t visit when you were sick or discouraged. He sinned against you. He doesn’t seem as concerned about your favorite ministry, idea, or concern as you are. His wife doesn’t lead anything. His kids aren’t as sinless as you would like.

But pastors only have so much time, energy, and talent. Your pastor isn’t called to be a preacher like that other person. He cannot spend all his time with you to be at your beck and call when there are other people who need his time too, especially his family. He cannot give his attention equally to every ministry and opinion. Rather, he must prioritize his responsibilities. And he cannot visit or encourage you when you are sick and hurting if you don’t tell him that you are sick and hurting!

3. Give Him The Benefit Of The Doubt

Paul teaches this principle when he writes, “Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses.”⁶ Somewhere along the line, people began to assume the pastor is guilty until proven innocent. But God says our attitude should be the opposite! Why should we give the pastor the benefit of the doubt?

First, there is more going on than you know. Often, there are details about situations that the pastor cannot share because they were told to him in

¹ 1 Chronicles 16:22 Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE, © Copyright The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, 1995. Used by permission.

² Proverbs 12:15

³ 1 Timothy 5:17

⁴ 3 John 1:4

⁵ Matthew 7:5

⁶ 1 Timothy 5:19

confidence. So the whole time you are attacking the pastor because you heard a rumor or because you don't approve of a decision, he can't defend himself without throwing someone else under the bus, which good pastors don't do.

Second, your pastor probably knows more about the issue than you. This is obviously not true about everything, but in some things, it really is true. Your pastor most likely spent years of education and study learning God's Word inside and out. He also has spent hours and hours in meetings discussing the very problem you just came across. Of course he can be wrong, and is sometimes, but assuming that you are correct about something and he is wrong because you did a Google search, heard it from a friend, or you gave five minutes to thinking about it is foolish and arrogant.

Third there are more people critiquing your pastor than you know. You are not the only one bringing criticism to his door. Others have done so as well, maybe about the same thing and maybe even the same day.

Before you assume the pastor is wrong, you should humbly hear him out and consider if he really is right about a decision or situation and be willing to follow his leadership, even if you disagree. That is what God commands when He says "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you."⁷

4. Speak Only For Yourself

First, don't exaggerate your concern. "Pastor, people are saying..." or "I can't tell you who, but someone in our church said..." are usually covers for when you want your own opinion to sound like it carries more weight.

Second, refuse to be a mouthpiece for gossip. If people are sharing things with you about the pastor, ask them either to stop or offer to go with them to talk with him. But do not approach the pastor as the spokesman for people because they are too cowardly to approach him themselves. It will not make the situation better and will only encourage gossip and distrust.

5. Pick Your Timing

People often approach pastors at the worst time: Sundays or late at night. If you approach him before church, you may feel more able to worship since you got whatever was bothering you off your chest, but you placed it firmly on his chest and now he will be thinking about it for the whole service and instead of

thinking about his sermon and other Sunday duties, he is thinking about your concern.

If you approach him in the line on the way out of church while he is greeting people, he will never be able to remember it. Though to you, it may be convenient to share your concerns or frustrations with the pastor while you are at church to save yourself a trip during the week, to your pastor, it is anything but convenient. Instead, set up a time to sit and talk with him when he can give you his undivided attention.

6. Give Positive Feedback Too

When all you do is criticize your pastor, you are not going to gain a hearing from him and most of your words will fall on deaf ears. Any person that only sees what's wrong with everything will not have an accurate view of life and the pastor would be foolish to take such criticism seriously, even when right.

Encourage your pastor when he is doing well. Tell him when his sermons made an impact on you. Thank him when he does visit. Talk highly of his wife and kids. Tell him how you are personally growing through his ministry.

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandments were, He said to love God and love people because all of the law boils down to that.⁸ When it comes to criticizing your pastor, the bottom line is to always ask, "Would I want someone to approach me the way I am about to approach the pastor?" Would you want unsigned letters? Would you want to be approached right before you have to give a talk at work? Would you want people to assume you are guilty until proven innocent? Would you want people to accuse you of wrong without knowing all the facts? Treat your pastor in a way that you would want to be treated and you will be amazed at how fruitful and life giving a conversation with your shepherd can be!

⁷ Hebrews 13:17

⁸ Matthew 22: 36-40