

# Along the track

## Criticism

Bishop Fulton Sheen is well along the road to being declared a saint, just one step away. That is quite a complicated process so for that to happen in such a short time speaks a lot about the saint-to-be. For someone my age, he was very much a part of our lives, the first tele-evangelist many would say. With the rise of television in the 1950s, dressed in his Bishop's cassock, cape and cap, he stood at a chalkboard and delivered his show *Life is Worth Living*.

It went into millions of living rooms in the US and here too in prime viewing time. He had an enormous group of followers (estimated to be around thirty million) as his message resonated with their lives and gave them direction and purpose. Over the years his common-sense talks nourished their faith. He attracted a fair bit of criticism too – not everyone was a fan, as the 1950s were years marked by sectarianism and bigotry.

It is pretty much impossible to go through life without facing criticism. If we are doing something worthwhile, we inevitably attract some advice as to how we might do it better; we may attract opposition, misunderstanding, suspicion, and even at some point, experience rejection. A certain amount of criticism can do us good, especially if we are learning new skills, new ways. On the other hand, we have to admit that we have shortcomings and faults, and that we miss the mark sometimes. There is always someone around who generously points that out!

Bishop Sheen is supposed to have said that criticism, like rain, should be gentle enough to nourish a person's growth without destroying the roots. I have read that elsewhere too, but that doesn't take away from the wisdom of that advice.

Some find it easy to criticise, to find fault or point out how this or that could have been done better. People who spend their time looking for faults often miss the opportunity to build something meaningful themselves; they miss opportunities to contribute.

We should always be open to improvement, but real growth comes from having a go ourselves, not from pointing out the imperfections of others. Am I trying to be helpful or put this person in their place? We all say things we later regret but don't let that become the defining moment in a relationship. It is better to be known for adding value, not adding criticism. How would you rate yourself in handling criticism?

Bishop Sheen attracted criticism, often because, of all things, his sense of humour. His critics regarded religion as a serious business and there was no room for humour there! He told a wonderful story about being meek.

Moses, he said, against all odds rescued his people from slavery and led them across the desert in very trying times with sheer courage and grit. Then Moses went up the mountain and received the commandments from the Lord, and when he came down, he found the people he had rescued worshipping idols. He was furious and this was the part that got Sheen into trouble, he said that Moses threw down the stone tablets and they shattered and thus, Sheen said, Moses became the first person to break all ten commandments at once.

Some members of his vast audience did not like that story or that sort of humour, and were very critical, not just of the story but of Sheen himself. That distinction is important – criticising an action or a story rather than criticising the person. But it was humour that helped him relate to his audience. Humour is part of being human – some have it in spades, others not so much, but that is all part of being unique.

The key ingredient of criticism should be respect. Respectful criticism addresses *what* a person did, not *who* they are. Without respect, feedback ceases to be something helpful, a catalyst for growth and instead may just become a personal condemnation.

It is interesting how Jesus dealt with criticism – sometimes he just remained silent, even when it was very aggressive. At other times he just went on with what he was doing and sometimes he provided a differing point of view, but not often. Silence can be a very powerful tool.

Bishop Sheen won an Emmy Award for "Most Outstanding Television Personality" in 1953, even besting celebrities like Lucille Ball. When he accepted his award, with his signature humour, he said, "*It is time I pay tribute to my four writers - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.*" It is not recorded whether he was criticised for that line!

Regards  
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