

Providing Criticism without causing pain: Lessons from the Book of Proverbs

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1. Introduction

The book of Proverbs is drawn from life. It describes “real life”. It is part of the Old Testament (OT) wisdom literature and according to Stendebach (2003:239), forms a “theology of practical reason”. The US professor of management, Michael A Zigarelli (1999:15), regards Proverbs to be the most practical book in the Bible, which inspired him to write a management book called “Management by Proverbs”. Proverbs, with its concentrated human experience and reflections, wants to help people cope in the world, live a fulfilled life and avoid danger (Albertz 1992:471). Because communication is such an important part of life, many proverbs deal with this topic. Bühlmann (1976) aptly titles his studies about Proverbs 10-31 “To talk and remain silent rightfully” (“Vom rechten Reden und Schweigen”). The following article concentrates on the aspects of criticism as a special kind of communication. Based on Proverbs, practical advice is provided about giving as well as accepting criticism. In this way, the parallels between the wisdom of the OT Proverbs and modern communication psychology will become clear. Regarding the exegesis and the theology of proverbs, I consulted the following works by the Old Testament theologians Bühlmann (1976), Murphy (1996, 1998), Plöger (2003), Stendebach (2003), von Rad (1992), Westermann (1996) and Zimmerli (1999). Concerning communication I learned greatly from Rosenberg (2003), Schulz von Thun (1997), and Weisbach and Sonne-Neubacher (2005).

2. “Iron Sharpened by iron”

Proverbs 27:7 (TJB) says one person is sharpened by contact with another. Iron is sharpened by iron. We need each other for character formation. Sometimes our rough edges need to be sanded down without distorting our personality and losing our profile. Criticism is important for character formation, which can be hard on us at times, but for solace we have the following: Anyone who reproves another will enjoy more favour in the end than the flatterer [28:23 TJB]. Certainly, in this case a well-meaning admonitory person is described who has the courage to say something, even if his message is bitter at first. In the end, he will enjoy more favour than the flatterer. The phrase “in the end” is especially important in this context, for few people react positively when they receive criticism. In principle, most people would probably agree that criticism is an opportunity for character formation. However, in reality one does not really enjoy listening to criticism. Thus the question is: How can we criticise each other without hurting each other?

3. “That You may gain Wisdom in the Future”

OT wisdom literature describes recurring events in life. Whoever knows about these causal relations and uses that knowledge in everyday life is wise in the biblical sense: Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future [19:20 ESV]. Whoever searches wisdom will be safe on their ways and sleep soundly at night (Proverbs 3: 23-24). The purpose of wisdom is to ensure that life is a success. That is why it helps to lengthen life: Long life is in her

right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour [3:16 ESV]. Wisdom is even compared to the “tree of life” in the story of Eden (Gn 3, 22). Exactly as the tree of life extends life, a wise lifestyle can do the same: She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called blessed [3:18a ESV]. Therefore the US expert on wisdom literature, Roland E Murphy, titles his monograph on biblical wisdom literature “The Tree of Life” (Murphy 1996). Proverbs formulates general pieces of wisdom that have proven their value through experience. However, they do not guarantee that wisdom is always the outcome. It is always possible that someone wise dies early or is harmed by disaster, as described in the book of Job. While the book of Psalms concentrates on the vertical relationship between God and humans, the book of Proverbs concentrates on the horizontal relationships, the ones between people – but in the face of God, because “the Lord will argue their case for them” (22:23)! To simplify: The book of Psalms stands for spiritual encounters with God, while the book of Proverbs stands for everyday life. Walther Zimmerli writes about the goals of the Israelite wisdom teachings: “Life of humans before God does not only take place in the `religious’ realm. There is also everyday life with a job, decisions that have to be made without a divine doctrine for every step, handling wife and children and friends, and your behaviour towards superiors and subordinated” (translated from Zimmerli 1999:136).¹ People ask for guidance in everyday life: How do I behave rightfully?

3.1 “But a wise man listens to advice”

Experience shows that different people react to criticism in very different ways. Proverbs distinguishes between wise people and fools: A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool [17:10 ESV]. The smart and wise person wants to improve; he is self-critical, searches for advice and criticism, and listens to it. The fool, on the other hand, does not even want advice. He does not let any opinion stand beside his own: The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice [12:15 ESV]. This looks peculiar: The wise person, who is already smart, likes to hear criticism. The fool, who could learn something and needs criticism most, does not want any advice. That is what humans are like: The truly wise want feedback, even if they already have great knowledge. Others are self-absorbed with their own knowledge, and convinced about what they think and do – wise in their own eyes. They do not ask for advice, and they do not want to listen, if advice is offered to them. They do not realise what is well-known by the people around them: They need advice more than anyone else.

3.2 “Who is wise in his own eyes”

It is no problem if someone does not know something and realises that this is the case. It is always a problem when someone does not recognise his own lack of knowledge. Whoever thinks he has full understanding of something will not look for advice from other people: Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him [26:12 ESV]. In Proverbs 26:12, a more subtle kind of foolishness is described, “that every person can blunder into, who believes himself to be wise. [...] Someone who is not necessarily judged as a fool according to his behaviour, but has the problem of an incorrect self-image, finds himself on a track that will, eventually, take him down” (translated from Plöger 2003:312-313). Even a fool has more hope than someone who thinks he is wise and, therefore, refuses to take advice. That is why the scorner

should follow the example of people with understanding, because they get deeper insight by listening to criticism: Smite a scorner, and the simple will beware: and reprove one that hath understanding, and he will understand knowledge [19:25 KJV].

4. “Wound as Deeply as any Sword”

We know we need criticism to grow, but we also know that criticism can hurt. Thoughtless words can wound as deeply as any sword [12:18a GNB]. Of course, we feel the sword wounds only when we are criticised, not when we use the sword ourselves in criticising others. The person criticising or giving feedback is in a powerful position in this situation. The same is true for praise, since it, too, can be an expression of superiority: Because I am your superior, I have the right to assess your deeds. Anyone in a powerful position is capable of hurting others.

4.1 Personality is a factor

People react quite differently to the “sword wounds” criticism can leave behind. It is highly dependent on their personality. Dominant people tend to feel challenged by criticism. That is how Hermann-Josef Johanns, CEO of the XX. World Youth Day of the Roman-Catholic Church, reacted towards critics: “I don’t mind criticism. If you write a nasty commentary about me I will cut it out and hang it up behind my mirror – in order to motivate myself” (translated from: Kölnische Rundschau 03/15/2005). Relationship-oriented people, on the other hand, tend to worry about the relationship, when criticism is passed. Conscientious people (amongst whom I would count myself) tend to define their personal worth in terms of the work they do. Therefore, if their work is criticised, they feel insecure about themselves in general. My wife and I once had to deal with criticism about the same thing and we both suffered a lot: my wife, because the relationship was affected and me, because my efforts did not seem good enough. A phlegmatic person listens to criticism patiently and willingly, but does not change anything. Thus, what one person feels to be a sword wound, somebody else may only perceive it to be a pin prick and a third person might not notice anything at all.

5. Of Inappropriate Silence

“Hidden love”

Now, some people might think, “I would be better off not to criticise anyone anymore. That way I can be sure that no one will get hurt“. But silence leads to the death of *any* relationship, even if protecting the relationship from being damaged is the motive. In the long run, remaining silent in a relationship is worse than fighting. This "modern" view can also be found in Solomon’s Proverbs: Better is open rebuke than hidden love [27:5 ESV]. Silence is not a sign of love or respect – irrespective of the reason for remaining silent, be it one’s own weakness or fear at losing a friend. Whoever holds back criticism for fear of losing a friend is behaving selfishly. Furthermore, silence is inappropriate if a third person has to suffer owing to someone’s behaviour of somebody and he is not able to defend himself. Here, the following can be applied: Whoever does not raise his voice about wrongdoing and injustice is complicit.

6. Of Appropriate Silence

I personally prefer clarity (which is also very typically German). Thus, I tend to talk about problems directly instead of hiding them. Not everyone around me appreciates that. In the following, you will see three cases, in which wisdom literature recommends silence rather than criticism.

6.1 “Do not reprove a scoffer”

Again and again, Proverbs refers to the fool in a negative light, “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes” (12:15a ESV). The logic implied by Proverbs is as follows: Because the scoffer, the fool, does not want advice, it is better not to give it:

Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse,
and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury.
Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you;
reprove a wise man, and he will love you.
Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser;
teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning.
[9:7-9 ESV]

This principle is also underlined in modern literature on feedback (eg Vilsmeier 2000:37): Unwanted feedback is unsuccessful. If the other person does not want feedback, it is completely useless to give it. It will not help anyway. Again, OT wisdom literature and modern communication psychology arrive at a similar conclusion.

6.2 “A quarrel, not one’s own”

“Whoever meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears” [26:17 ESV]. This is an extremely helpful hint concerning conflict management: It is foolish to pull a dog’s ears! (Maybe not with toy-dogs, but if you do that with a German Shepherd, you will regret it.) It is just as foolish to interfere in a fight that is none of your business. The opponents could decide to unite and tell the mediator, “Who gave you the right to judge our situation?” The parties in conflict then unite, because they have found a common enemy. Thus, the mediator has a problem because there is a powerful alliance against him. The obvious question arises: When must I interfere if I want to act as a responsible leader? That depends how much the conflict has escalated. If the level of escalation is low, it is preferable and possible for the parties to find their own solution. If the level of escalation is intermediate, a mediator becomes necessary and if the situation is already highly charged, it is necessary to act as a judge and directly interfere with authority. Intervention becomes unavoidable when the community (family, firm, project, church, etc) is endangered or somebody is in danger of getting seriously hurt. For more information concerning escalation of conflict, see Glasl 2004.

6.3 “Don’t pay attention to everything people say”

The German labour court in Frankfurt am Main (Aktenzeichen 6 Ca 7216/04) has stated that criticism of a superior does not automatically lead to an official warning (*Lexisnexis* 2005). In a case, an employee told her colleague that “The people up there are all crazy”. Her colleague

reported this to their superior, who officially warned the employee. After the labour court's decision the warning had to be removed from the personnel records. The court ruled that not every derogatory remark should automatically lead to a harsh sanction, as long as the superior is not publically defamed or harmony in the company is not disturbed. Similar advice is already given in Ecclesiastes, which also belongs to the body of OT wisdom literature: Don't pay attention to everything people say – you may hear your servant insulting you, and you know yourself that you have insulted other people many times [Eccle 7:21, 22 GNB]. The reaction to criticism does not have to be further criticism. Sometimes it is best to act like Saul, Israel's first king. When he was anointed not everyone was happy with the choice: "But some worthless fellows said, 'How can this man save us?' And they despised him and brought him no present. But he held his peace." (1Sm 10:27 ESV). Of course, Saul could have become furious, acted like a king, and reprimanded the critics. However, he ignored the criticism, kept his peace, and did not react with the same behaviour. This passage of wisdom from Ecclesiastes encourages us to be more relaxed when confronted with false statements. I do not have to react to every passing remark with counter-criticism. Sometimes it is best just to "keep your peace". Criticising every small detail holds the danger of losing perspective. One cannot see the wood for the trees. Concentrate on the important things; the things you really want to change.

7. Of Wise Criticism

[As] an earring of gold, and an ornament of fine gold,
[so is] a wise reprover upon an obedient ear.

[25:12 KJV]

It is ideal for both things to come together: be a wise critic and someone who listens closely. Following offers some practical advice on criticising in a wise manner.

7.1 "Better to correct someone openly"

Germany is seen as supposedly a nation of critics. Many Germans follow the motto "Nicht geschimpft ist gelobt genug" ("No criticism is praise enough"). To prevent being overly critical, some recommend always saying ten positive things before saying something negative. For some ill-tempered people who tend to see everything negatively this might actually help them to look on the bright side every now and then. However, in general, this rule does not seem convincing. When I once received criticism by someone who seemed to be adhering to this rule, it gave me an awkward feeling. I got the impression that my counterpart was making an effort to mention a few positive things before getting to the negative items. I really could not enjoy the positive things he said. I would have preferred an open and direct approach. As mentioned above, Proverbs 27:5 encourages us to be open and honest in our criticism. The following verse provides an example: Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy [27:6 ESV]. "Flattery will get you anywhere" is a popular English expression. But a charmer only uses you to reach his goals. That is why Proverbs 27:6 calls him an enemy. Although we all like flattery: "Those who

love me tell me the truth.” Every piece of criticism is consulting for free. I preached in our church once. In the afternoon my oldest son came to me and said, “You should not have said the things you said in the first five minutes of your sermon”. That was not very flattering, but I had to admit he was right. Because of my inappropriate introduction, I had lost some of my listeners. I had already noticed myself that the sermon was not as inspiring as I had hoped and with the help of my son I found out why not. Those who continuously close themselves off from criticism and refuse to seek advice will be like a knife that has not been sharpened in a while (Prov 27:17): edgeless, ineffective, and eventually useless. People in powerful positions tend to have many charmers surrounding them (how helpful to have children at home who tell the truth!). That is why the US organisational psychologist, Roderick Kramer (2000) recommends managers to keep people close who relentlessly tell the truth. The former Hollywood film producer, Samuel Goldwyn, did just that by stating: “I want everyone to tell me the truth, even if it costs him his job”. Goldwyn’s insight is familiar from Proverbs 28:23. Kramer’s article is titled “Hochmut kommt vor dem Fall”, which is a German saying derived from the OT Proverbs 16:18a (ESV): “Pride goes before destruction”.

7.2 “A word fitly spoken”

And a word in season, how good it is!

[15:23b ESV]

A word fitly spoken
is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

[25:11ESV]

Not only is the choice of words important. It is also important to find a “fit” time, not too early, not too late. The vexation of a fool is known at once, but the prudent ignores an insult. [12:16 ESV]. The fool reacts on impulse and shows his vexation immediately but the wise person can control his feelings. He does not react on his first impulse, but can restrain himself until the right time comes. The insight from Proverbs 12:16a has an equivalent in the statutes of the German army: An inferior soldier may complain about his superior but there has to be 24 hours between the event and the complaint. This prevents fools from reacting in anger immediately.

Waiting to deliver your criticism is advantageous for the critic as well as for the person having to deal with criticism. In the first case, it can prevent unnecessary fights, as the anger you feel directly in a situation might not seem so bad the next day and you might then wonder why you reacted so strongly. It is also helpful for the person being criticised - sometimes that person has gone to great lengths and great effort. When I have just preached, I am tired. My wife knows that and reacts wisely. She waits with her opinion until I have had time to relax, so she will neither tell me directly after the sermon, nor in the car on the way home. People who are tired do not have the energy they need to deal with criticism.

However, it is also not wise to wait too long with criticism. Firstly, the counterpart may not be able to remember the situation you are referring to and secondly, this may lead to an

atmosphere of suspicion. If you tell an employee on 1 August that you disapproved of something that happened on 1 February, he will feel insecure. He can never feel certain that you are happy with his work because you could always mention half a year later that you were actually dissatisfied. Finding the right moment is always relevant in conversation, when criticising, however, it is especially important. Do not state it too quickly but, also, do not wait too long. The ancient Greeks actually had a word for the right time “kairos”. Recognising the “kairos” is a great part of showing wisdom.

7.3 “When words are many, transgression is not lacking”

Some people have the bad habit of talking too much while giving criticism. They talk and talk and talk. You quickly know what they want to say, you have understood and accepted what has to change, but the other person will not stop talking. And every word hurts you more. You feel like a child who understands what it did wrong, but whose parents do not stop ranting. When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent [10:19 (ESV)]. If you have to criticise someone, do not talk more than necessary. That can be more hurtful than helpful. State your point of view with few, but clear and direct, words.

7.4 “A mild answer turns away wrath”

A mild answer turns away wrath,
sharp words stir up anger.

[15:1 TJB]

It is an honour for a man to keep aloof from strife,
but every fool will be quarrelling.

[20:3 ESV]

Insults start a fight. Statements and judgments about the other person (“you are...”) lead to a rapid escalation of the situation. Your opponent will react by defending himself or attacking you back. A more gentle approach would be “I-messages”: If I talk about myself, about my emotions and really only mention my own view, escalation can be avoided. For further information regarding the expression of emotions, see Rosenberg (2003) or Kessler (2010:33-37).

7.5 “Slow to speak”

Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger Jam 1:19 ESV. If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame [18:13 ESV]

Both Bible verses show that before criticising one has to listen carefully and watch the other person. Ask yourself the questions, “What exactly did the other person say and what is it I am unhappy about?”

The German communication expert, Schulz von Thun (1997:72), explains that three processes take place inside the recipient:

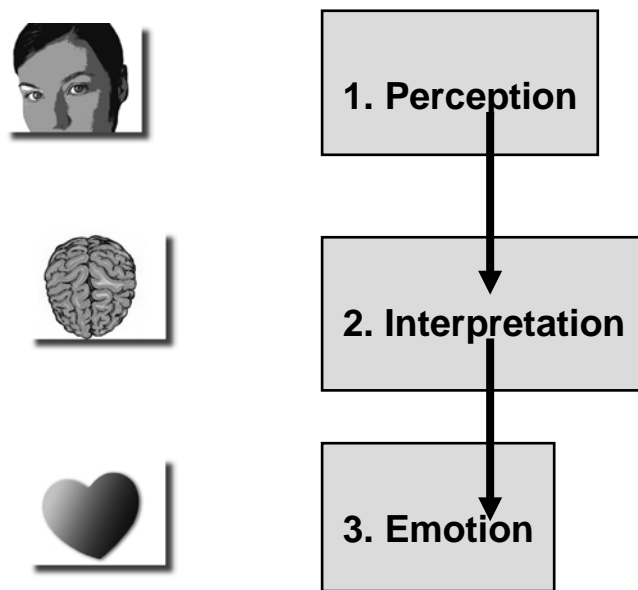


Figure 1: Three processes that take place within the recipient

The first process, perception, takes place through our senses: we see, hear or feel something. Secondly, we interpret this data. Interpretation is an act of thinking. The interpretation can be true or false, but in either case it will trigger an emotion in us. “In general, we are not very proficient in distinguishing between these three steps, which allows them to merge into a mixed product” (translated from Schulz von Thun 1997:73)ⁱⁱ. I went to the supermarket with my son one day and he spent all his money on sweets. Unhappy about this, I said, “You are not capable of saving money”. What was happening inside of me? In my perception, I saw my son spending all his money on sweets. My interpretation was that he is incapable of saving it, since he just spent it all and I was angry because I had had to work hard to earn that money.

The problem was that everything was mixed up in the expression “You are incapable of saving”. We tend to judge all deeds immediately. It is a fine art to watch closely before judging and interpreting. Although most people do not enjoy being judged themselves, it is in our nature to judge others prematurely.

Gentle feedback is a combination of three steps:

1. Perception (without judgment)
2. Emotion: The feeling a situation has caused in me.
3. Desired action: What do I want the other person to do about it?

8.0 Conclusion

“Death and Life are in the Gift of the Tongue”

Words are powerful. The OT begins with the story of how God created a whole universe by using just words. “God said – and it happened” (Gn 1). As they are created in the image of God, humans are able to speak, and their words also have power. This power can be used to encourage

(blessing) or destroy (curse): Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits [18:21 ESV]. Humans have it in their power to use their tongues rightfully or wrongfully. This is why they are responsible for their words and have to deal with the consequences (“fruit”) of their words.

In the New Testament, James talks about the great impact of the small tongue and provides teachings closest to those in Proverbs. When talking about the tongue, he refers back to Proverbs 18, 21: So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things James 3:5 (ESV). James confirms the power of the tongue. However, there is a slight difference between Proverbs and James. Proverbs 18:21 emphasises the control humans have over their tongues whereas James 3:8 comes to the conclusion “But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison”. On the one hand, humans have power over the tongue but, on the other hand, they have serious problems in executing that power. James’ conclusion is equivalent to another expression from the Proverbs 16:1 (ESV): The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord.

In all efforts to be wise and in all attempts to learn from the wise, the OT knows that, in the end, the art of giving the right answers, saying the right things, and using the right words at the right time always comes from God – it is a gift. “For the Lord gives wisdom“ [2:6a]. That is why we should ask God for wisdom (Ja 1:5a). This advice does not mean we can lazily wait around and have God do everything. We remain responsible for the way we talk and are expected to become wiser in this field. This requires practice and learning.

Using the analogy of the opposites of life and death, James 3:9,10 urges us to use the tongue as a blessing to those around us. He calls on us to become wise (Ja 3:13) and his conclusion again corresponds with Proverbs 12:18 : “Thoughtless words can wound as deeply as any sword” (GNB). Wise people use their tongues in a life-promoting manner, while tattlers use it in a life-destroying manner. Modern communication theory teaches a similar distinction: “conversation saver” and “conversation killer” (Weisbach & Sonne-Neubacher 2005:135,161).

Each individual is left with the choice: Do I want to use my tongue for life or death? Do I want to promote conversation or destroy it? Whoever decides to promote life can rely on the following summary:

1. Be open.
2. Find the right moment.
3. Keep it short and clear.
4. Be gentle: perception – emotion – desired action.
5. If objective criteria have been damaged, name these criteria, and explain why they have been damaged.

9. END NOTES

This article is an extract from my book (Keeler 2010), which has been published in Germany and Poland.

The Proverbs chosen are taken from different translations: The New Jerusalem Bible (TNJB), Good News Bible (GNB), King James version (KJV), and the English Standard version (ESV). I have chosen the translation that I find linguistically the best or that expresses most clearly the aspects I refer to.

ⁱGerman original: “Das Leben der Menschen bewegt sich nicht nur im Bereich der explizit religiösen Sphäre. Da ist der Alltag mit seiner Berufsarbeit, den Entscheidungen, die getroffen werden, ohne das ein göttliches Gebot jeden Schritt wiese, der zwischenmenschliche Umgang mit Frau und Kind und Freund, das Verhalten gegenüber Vorgesetzten und Untergebenen.”

ⁱⁱGerman original: “In der Regel sind wir wenig geübt, diese drei Vorgänge in uns auseinanderzuhalten: sie verschmelzen zu einem Kuddelmuddel-Produkt.”

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