

THE PRIZE: Under Pressure

Session 3 – People’s Opinions

Leader’s Guide

Featuring Jacob Mulenga (Zambia) and Nehemiah

DVD – 6:22 to 9:36

WARM-UP

Have you ever had someone who doesn’t really know you criticize you for something you did? How did it make you feel?

TEAM HUDDLE

“The higher you go, the worse [it becomes] every time you miss one ball – you have thousands of people calling you names or calling you stupid. Every time you score one goal, you have millions saying, “You’re the greatest.” – Jacob Mulenga

How do you think the criticism of fans or the media might affect a footballer like Jacob?

Jacob also talks about the same people celebrating him when he does something well. What might the dangers be in believing the crowd when they say, “You’re the greatest”?

Whose opinions do you think you need to listen to and why?

COACH’S CORNER

Read Nehemiah 4:1-9

The context - God has called Nehemiah to gather a team together to rebuild the walls of the city of Jerusalem. His people, the Jews, have faced decades of defeat. Many of them have been taken off to a foreign land, and those who are left behind are living in poverty and in a city that is broken. By the time we get to chapter four, they have begun the task, but the work is hard and resources are limited.

Sanballat was very angry when he learned that we were rebuilding the wall. He flew into a rage and mocked the Jews, ²saying in front of his friends and the Samaritan army officers, “What does this bunch of poor, feeble Jews think they’re doing? Do they think they can build the wall in a single day by just offering a few sacrifices? Do they actually think they can make something of stones from a rubbish heap—and charred ones at that?”

³*Tobiah the Ammonite, who was standing beside him, remarked, “That stone wall would collapse if even a fox walked along the top of it!”*

⁴*Then I prayed, “Hear us, our God, for we are being mocked. May their scoffing fall back on their own heads, and may they themselves become captives in a foreign land! ⁵Do not ignore their guilt. Do not blot out their sins, for they have provoked you to anger here in front of the builders.”*

⁶At last the wall was completed to half its height around the entire city, for the people had worked with enthusiasm.

⁷But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites heard that the work was going ahead and that the gaps in the wall of Jerusalem were being repaired, they were furious.⁸ They all made plans to come and fight against Jerusalem and throw us into confusion. ⁹ But we prayed to our God and guarded the city day and night to protect ourselves.

What things do Sanballat and Tobiah say about the Jews and the work they are attempting to do (vs. 2-3)?

Why might Nehemiah be wise to reject this criticism?

It comes from those who are clearly opposed to God's plan and purpose.

When might it be wise for us to ignore criticism?

When might it be wise for us to listen to criticism and why?

Criticism can correct us. There's often truth in what the critic says about us or our work, even though he or she may express it crudely. We're wise indeed if we can let the harsh chaff go, and still receive the grain of truth. *"Whoever disregards discipline comes to poverty and shame, but whoever heeds correction is honored"* (Proverbs 13:18).

Nehemiah responds by turning to God in prayer (vs. 4). Why do you think he does this? Why might it be helpful for you to turn to God in prayer first, when facing criticism and opposition?

Prayer helps us to see God's perspective.

- It might help us to see the truth in the criticism and allow the Holy Spirit to reveal to us how we can grow from it.
- It can help us to release our anger, bitterness or resentment and receive God's grace so we don't internalize the criticism or respond by seeking revenge.
- It can remind us of our true identity as loved, chosen and significant children of God.
- Most importantly, it can help us recall that God can deal with our critics and that He will judge.

It might be helpful to contrast Nehemiah's prayer with the teaching of Jesus who commands us and shows us how to love our enemies (Luke 6:27-36).

Verse 6 clearly indicates that the criticism didn't stop the work. Criticism can sometimes frighten us and stop us from taking risks or doing what needs to be done. Why do you think this might be the case?

Are there ways you have found helpful in dealing with criticism? Be willing to share these with the group.

WARM-DOWN

²⁷ "But to you who are willing to listen, I say, love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you.²⁸ Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who hurt you." (Luke 6:27-28)

Spend some time on your own thinking about this radical and challenging teaching of Jesus. In prayer, ask God to help you to love those who may have harshly or unfairly criticized you. Spend a few moments

praying for those whose words and actions may have hurt you. Remember that in our sin we have made ourselves enemies of God, but He still chose to love us despite this.

End your time together as a group in prayer.

EXTRA TRAINING

Memory Verse

“But to you who are willing to listen, I say, love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you.²⁸ Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who hurt you.” (Luke 6:27-28)

Prayer/Worship Focus

Jesus confronted considerable opposition and faced much criticism during His life, yet He never allowed this criticism to define Him, delay Him or discourage Him. He got on with all that His Heavenly Father had called Him to do. Spend some time during the week reading and reflecting on the words His Father spoke over His life at His baptism. – Matthew 3:13-17. Imagine the Heavenly Father speaking those words over and into your life. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you secure your identity in no one and nothing else but God alone.

Putting it into Practice

Jesus didn't base His identity on what others said about Him. He lived His whole life out of the security, identity and significance that came from His relationship with His Heavenly Father. What mattered was not the criticism or the praise of the crowd, but the voice of His Father. Make sure you are intentional about spending regular time in God's Word and allowing it to speak to you so that you find your true identity in Christ.