

## A Sin of the Wilderness: Criticism

### Numbers 12

**Numbers 12** - *"Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married; for he had married an Ethiopian woman. <sup>2</sup> So they said, "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us also?" And the LORD heard it. <sup>3</sup> (Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth.) <sup>4</sup> Suddenly the LORD said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, "Come out, you three, to the tabernacle of meeting!" So the three came out. <sup>5</sup> Then the LORD came down in the pillar of cloud and stood in the door of the tabernacle, and called Aaron and Miriam. And they both went forward. <sup>6</sup> Then He said, "Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak to him in a dream. <sup>7</sup> Not so with My servant Moses; He is faithful in all My house. <sup>8</sup> I speak with him face to face, even plainly, and not in dark sayings; and he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses?"*

*<sup>9</sup> So the anger of the LORD was aroused against them, and He departed. <sup>10</sup> And when the cloud departed from above the tabernacle, suddenly Miriam became leprous, as white as snow. Then Aaron turned toward Miriam, and there she was, a leper. <sup>11</sup> So Aaron said to Moses, "Oh, my lord! Please do not lay this sin on us, in which we have done foolishly and in which we have sinned. <sup>12</sup> Please do not let her be as one dead, whose flesh is half consumed when he comes out of his mother's womb!"*

*<sup>13</sup> So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, "Please heal her, O God, I pray!" <sup>14</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, "If her father had but spit in her face, would she not be shamed seven days? Let her be shut out of the camp seven days, and afterward she may be received again." <sup>15</sup> So Miriam was shut out of the camp seven days, and the people did not journey till Miriam was brought in again. <sup>16</sup> And afterward the people moved from Hazeroth and camped in the Wilderness of Paran."*

### Background Notes

What's the first question that comes to your mind when you read this chapter? I think that I know what it is: Why did Miriam get leprosy, but Aaron did not? Most likely the answer is right here in the first part of verse 1. In the original Hebrew text, the verb "spoke" is feminine, and it is singular. The fact that the verb is feminine/singular is a strong indication that **Miriam was the instigator** in this criticism of Moses. Aaron joined in, that's for sure, but Miriam probably led the criticism.

Another question that always comes up in Numbers 12 is about verse 3: “*Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth.*” How could Moses, the human author of the book of Numbers, write this about himself? Wouldn’t the fact that he wrote that he was humble disqualify him from being the most humble man on the face of the earth?! Critics of the Bible use this verse in their arguments against Moses being the author of the Pentateuch. So what is the answer here? There are three possible answers:

1. Even though Moses was the human author of the book of Numbers, because of the process of inspiration, **God is the ultimate author**, and **God** wrote this about Moses. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, both the virtues and the weaknesses of the biblical characters were recorded, regardless of who the human authors were.
2. Another inspired writer, maybe Joshua, may have added this verse later. There is a good possibility that Joshua also wrote last chapter of Deuteronomy about the death of Moses. This possibility doesn’t affect the doctrine of inspiration. Remember that we are not talking here about some sort of “scribal additions” that were supposedly added later to the text! No. We’re talking about the completion of Holy Scripture under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
3. In the culture of Moses’ day, humility and meekness were not considered outstanding virtues, so Moses would not be exhibiting pride when he wrote that he was the most humble man on the face of the earth. As an example, what if I told you that I was the shyest person on the face of the earth? That’s not exactly a proud statement, because being shy is not considered to be an outstanding virtue in our society today.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. The sin of criticism results from jealousy in the human heart.

Miriam and Aaron criticized Moses in two areas: his **person** and his **position**. As to his person, they criticized his **marriage** (v1). As to his position, they criticized his **leadership** (v2).

Most likely the “Cushite” (Ethiopian) woman mentioned here was Moses’ second wife, whom he married after the death of Zipporah, his first wife. This marriage was not against the Law because Ethiopians were not Canaanites. Ethiopians were foreigners and descendants of Ham, while Moses was a descendent of Shem, but evidently God did not disapprove of this marriage, and He rebuked Miriam and Aaron for their criticism of Moses’ wife. This fact shows that God is not opposed to interracial marriage. Every marriage will be tested, and interracial marriages often have problems that must be worked through, but God is not against interracial marriages.

Jealousy was probably the real reason behind Miriam and Aaron’s criticism of Moses. Exodus 15 says that Miriam was a prophetess, but her position of honor had been diluted because the seventy new leaders in Israel had also prophesied. And there was now a new “First Lady” in the camp, Moses’ new wife! Can you see the possibility of jealousy here?

In addition, perhaps Aaron, Moses' older brother, was not in the limelight as much as he was when the Israelites were in Egypt, when he was a spokesman before Pharaoh for Moses. So this may have been some reason for jealousy. Both Miriam, as prophetess, and Aaron, as High Priest, had great positions in the camp of Israel - but in spite of that, it seems that they were jealous of Moses, and thus they criticized his person and his position.

This can happen today, too. When we're jealous of someone, we generally try to lower their status by criticizing their person or their position (or both). As to their person, we criticize their clothes, or their mannerisms, or their hair, or their teeth, or their weight, or their character, or their spouse, their children - on we could go. As to their position, we generally criticize their authority, or their qualifications, or their importance, or their effectiveness. In some way, we try to bring them down. Why? Because we're jealous!

Whenever you're about to criticize another person, stop and examine your own heart! Usually when the "leaf" of criticism is in your mouth, the "branch" of jealousy and the "root" of pride are in your heart.

The sin of criticism results from jealousy in the human heart.

## 2. The sin of criticism results in the delay of God's people.

Moses had a very unique relationship with the Lord (v6-8). It's possible that the Lord even spoke to Moses in Hebrew! And notice that Moses didn't have to defend himself from the criticism. **God defended him!** What a lesson for us! Romans 12:19 says, "*Never take your own revenge. I will repay, says the Lord.*"

The Lord sternly reprimanded Miriam and Aaron for their criticism of Moses. In view of Aaron's comment: "*Please do not let her be as one dead, whose flesh is half consumed when he comes out of his mother's womb!*" it appears that Miriam's case of leprosy was severe,

Would you be able to pray as Moses did: "*So Moses cried out to the Lord saying, 'Please heal her, O God, I pray!'*" (v13). Would you be able to pray like that for people who criticize you? I must admit (to my shame) that I would probably want to sit back and let God bring on the judgment - and maybe even secretly gloat just a little bit. But Moses was gracious - his character was so gracious! What an example for us!

"*Then the LORD said to Moses, 'If her father had but spit in her face, would she not be shamed seven days? Let her be shut out of the camp seven days, and afterward she may be received again'*"(v14). The Lord's point here was that if an earthly father would rebuke a child's open rebellion in such a way, how much more was God justified in shutting Miriam out of the camp for her **criticism of God's authority**.

Now look at verses 9 and 15: "*So the anger of the LORD was aroused against them, and He departed*" ... "*So Miriam was shut out of the camp seven days, and the people did not journey till Miriam was brought in again.*" Do you see the

spiritual lesson? The Lord departed from the midst of His people, and the people were delayed from moving forward. Even though Aaron acknowledged that he and Miriam had sinned, and God answered Moses' prayer and healed Miriam, there still were consequences to the sin of criticism.

This is still true today. When you criticize other believers in the family of God, the presence of the Lord departs in some way, and the spiritual progress of your church (or your fellowship, or your ministry) is delayed in some way.

The sin of criticism results in the delay of God's people.

## Practical Application

**Remember -- the Lord hears what you don't want Him to hear!**

Notice the words at the end of verse 2: "*and the Lord heard it...*" Heard what? He heard their **criticism**. And the Lord hears our criticisms as well!

At this point, someone will probably ask, "Isn't there a place for constructive criticism?" Yes, there is - but all too often we excuse our destructive criticism by claiming that it is constructive criticism. (Right?) Unfortunately we do that all too often. If you feel that you have something constructive to say to a person, don't share it with other people as gossip! Don't complain and criticize with everyone else! Go to that person one on one and share your constructive concern with them gently and personally.

And remember - before we go one on one to that person, we should always follow our Lord's principle about finding fault in others: "*First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.*" (Matthew 7:5).

Be very careful about this sin of the wilderness. It is all too easy to commit the sin of criticism. Remember, the Lord hears what you don't want Him to hear!