

Criticism can help us grow. But we usually accept or reject criticism depending on who's offering it. When it comes from someone we ^{care to} respect, we're more open than when it comes from someone we ^{don't} respect. For example, we create political satire about our own government. But we don't tolerate it when other nations criticize our leaders. We complain about our own family members, but we get very loyal if someone outside the family does it. Criticism powerfully promotes growth when it comes from the right source.

John the Baptist strolls in on advent today and immediately begins complaining. He stands at the Jordan, invites people to confess their sins, and pours water over them to symbolize their repentance. All of a sudden a large number of Pharisees and Sadducees appear. We've come to expect controversy whenever they're around, but here they're not looking for trouble; they come peacefully for baptism; they humbly subject themselves to this opinionated preacher, a skinny Rush Limbaugh dressed like Tarzan and munching on locusts. The Pharisees and Sadducees do not start an argument. So John does. "You brood of vipers," he opens. (*Who? Us?*) John calls his religious leaders hypocrites. They call themselves children of Abraham, but they don't live that way. John says being a child of Abraham is no big deal. God could raise up children of Abraham aplenty out of the rocks in the River Jordan. John wants more than pedigree, he wants action. By picking on the big guys, John serves warning to every other candidate for baptism. If religious leadership won't guarantee salvation, every potential follower must prepare to confess their sins and change their hearts.

John's criticism sounds so strong because he directs it against his own religious leaders. It's a criticism within the family. Especially at Christmas, society expects us to live at peace with one another--individuals within families and nations within the world. But peace need not cover up our differences like snowfall over a trashy back yard. Peace thrives with honesty, within communities where people respect their differences, challenge one another, and grow.