



## Don't Be Critical

Criticism is a part of our everyday life. It almost seems a part of good judgment. It seems necessary. You cannot live through a day without hearing some or giving some. Yet, the Bible says, "Judge not, that you be not judged" (Matt 7:1-5).

We have all been critical. We have all been criticized. Criticism is often a force that joins people together in a common cause. It is the main tool of those who divide countries, families, communities, and churches.

The largest single group to have left the church in great numbers in the last century were the "boomers," those born from 1946 to 1964. Early "boomers" were deeply affected by race and gender discrimination; and they saw the church perpetuating it. To the shame of the church, blatant racial and gender jokes were far too common in her pulpits until the mid-1970s. A great number of boomers saw the church as: refusing to think, doubt or question; as having unrealistic fears; as having attitudes of conflict; as engaging in simplistic thinking; and as having excessive judgmental attitudes. Excessive judgmental attitudes!

In a desperate attempt to salvage something from the negative aura of criticism, we have paired it with the word *constructive*. We now have *constructive criticism*. Too often, it is a way to put a "positive-spin" on our "nit-picking," and peevishness.

However, don't bet too much on any criticism being constructive. Almost all criticism is *destructive criticism*.

Most *constructive criticism* has within it all the hurtful components of any criticism. *Constructive criticism* is a noble idea; however, even if it were possible for it to be pure in its intent, we must remember: there are very few people who can take it.

What is the best advice on how to criticize properly? It was given by Jesus (Matthew 7:1). It can be given in one word. *Don't*. "Judge Not."

Don't criticize. Why?

***First, criticism does little good.*** Most people live on a fine edge. They work hard to keep their spirits up. They want to get along. *They are like you!*

It doesn't take much criticism to discourage people. It doesn't take much criticism to ruin their day. It doesn't take much criticism to cause them a sleepless night. *This is also true of you!* Right? No wonder Jesus gave this advice about criticism.

When Mary Todd Lincoln and others spoke harshly of the Southern people, Lincoln replied: "Don't criticize

them; they are just what we would be under similar circumstances."

One of Lincoln's most used quotations was first given by Jesus, "Judge not, that you be not judged."

After his defeat at Gettysburg, Lee retreated with his army to find a swollen, impassable Potomac River blocking his retreat. He was trapped. Lincoln ordered General Meade to attack. Meade did not. The waters receded, and Lee escaped. Many historians of the Civil War believe that if Meade had obeyed the order, two years would have been cut from the Civil War, and many lives would have been saved.

Lincoln wrote a letter to Meade telling him just that. Meade never read the letter, because it was never sent. It was found among Lincoln's papers after his death. Why? Perhaps if any one of us had seen as much blood as did Meade at Gettysburg, we too would have had no heart for an attack on a trapped army at the swollen Potomac.

**Second, criticism generates unnecessary opposition.** That is exactly right! Have you ever had the experience of thinking of just the right reply for an opponent, too late? ...something that would have really made them look foolish? "If I had only thought of that just a little sooner, I could have shown them." Well be glad that you are a *slow thinker*. It may be one of your greatest assets. If you were only a quicker thinker, you could have enough unnecessary enemies and opponents to "do you in" completely.

Proverbs 15:1 warns that it is a "Soft answer that turns away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger."

It is a proven fact of social science that people will tend to match each other for affect. If you respond to anger with anger, you will fuel the hostility. On the other hand, if you come into the conversation with genuine concern, and an affect a little lower than theirs, they will come down, and you will defuse a bomb. If you want to do ministry, you must learn to *hold your tongue*.

"He or she that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and they that rule their spirits better than they that take a city" (Proverbs 16:32).

"The discretion of a person defers his anger; and it is his glory to pass over a transgression" (Pro. 19:11).

What is the ability to *pass over a transgression*? It is different than forgiving. It is more like, "Don't latch on to it and go to feud over it." Learn how to *let go of a thing*.

Because of the tendency of criticism to generate unnecessary opposition for Christian ministry, Jesus said, "Agree with your adversary quickly." If you don't, he or she will become your constant opponent, dogging your every step.

It is the nature of some to pick out all the areas in which they disagree and *overlook all the areas where they agree*.

This is a poor tactic for ministry and for life. It can only tie up all of your energies in an incessant battle and contest, and your opponent will never be won to your side.

Benjamin Franklin was known to be very tactless in his youth, but he was wise enough to learn. As an old man, he said that the secret of his success was, "I will speak ill of no person, and speak all the good I know of everybody."

Certainly this is part of what Jesus meant when he said, we are to "overcome evil with good." Play up the good in everyone. Play up the good work that God is doing in the world --after all, it's not like God is helpless. Crime has dropped steadily since 1991 --do you hear the church celebrating that? Civil rights, racial equality and women's rights have advanced more in the past 50 years than in the former 200 --there is cause for celebration. Our daughters have rights and opportunities that our mothers could have only dreamed of. A just God is at work, delivering justice to all! How many are the countries that are no longer under the heel of Russia? Yes, we did carefully and methodically pull out of the great recession of 2008. Have you forgotten? Reinforce the good in your opponent. Find the points of agreement and commend him or her heartily for them! Be thankful! There is so much to be thankful for!

Why should God answer our prayers when we fail to notice all the good he is already doing? Why should He do more when we won't even notice the answers He has already sent?

When dealing with people, we must remember that we are not dealing with creatures of logic; we are dealing with creatures of emotion. Criticism is a dangerous spark, that can ignite a great deal of hostility in the very person you hope to win. It is more likely to hurt them than help them.

It is a very useless tool in that respect.

It is for this reason, that *you cannot win an argument*. No one has ever won an argument. There is only one way to get the best of an argument; and that is to avoid it.

The reason is simple: You cannot make a friend by attacking your opponent -or by making him or her look like a fool. Nine times out of 10, an argument ends with each contestant being more firmly convinced that he or she is right.

And if you are successful in zapping him or her good. What then? You may feel fine; but, what about them? You cannot win an argument; because, if you do, you always lose *your opponent*.

Further, as people watch you successfully blasting your opponent they are very likely to generate a sympathy for your beaten foe, and an animosity toward you and your mean-spirited Christianity.

Remember, criticism is not powered by purely noble and constructive forces. It is designed to trap, humiliate, and defeat an opposition - not to win over your opponent.

"Whoso digs a pit shall fall therein: and he or she that rolls a stone, it will return upon him/her" (Pro. 26:27).

***There is an old fable about the sun and the wind that goes like this:***

One day a boy was walking home from a one-room school. The sun and the wind got into argument about who was the strongest. The wind said, "I'll prove that I'm the strongest, see that boy down there? I bet I can make him take off his coat."

The wind blew. The strength of his power got to near tornado force. Yet, the harder he blew, the tighter the boy held his coat. Finally, the wind calmed down and gave up.

Then the sun came out with a big smile on the young boy. Soon, the boy mopped his brow and took off his coat.

It was then that the sun told the wind that gentleness and friendliness are always the stronger force.

Remember, if you intend to be helpful, you cannot *force people* to take up your position. The more you criticize, the tighter they will hold onto their coat.

***Third, you may be wrong about the issue.*** How many times has the church been wrong? There have been many big issues taken up by the church; however, in looking back, everyone agrees that she was wrong about far too many of them.

"The simple believeth every word: but the prudent person looketh well to his or her going" (Proverbs 14:15).

You may be wrong. Here, wisdom and morality are joined. It is the better part of wisdom to collect as much information as possible **before** you make up your mind on a thing --and then, be mighty careful. You're never entirely right. If you discover that, you will at least be right about humility.

It is the characteristic of critical people to make up their mind about things very quickly, with little information, hardly any time, and no input from their opponent. Still, they are often able to get great followings.

In this way, criticism is hurtful because people who criticize take advantage of a great *non-investigative* audience who are quick to believe the worst and who refuse to "check up" --people who "cherry-pick" all of their information.

So it is that, "The simple are ready to believe every word: but the prudent person looks well to his or her going" (Proverbs 14:15-16).

These simple people believe every hurtful word, (they *don't* or *won't* bother to get the "rest of the story") while the prudent leaves the damaging report open to doubt in the light of missing information. Here is the clincher: information is always missing. In reviewing his life, Walter Cronkite noted that one of the things he said at the end of every broadcast was "And that's the way it is January 16, 1962 ...and so forth." In reflection, Cronkite remarked, "That's arrogant, we never know exactly *the way it is.*"

But you say: "We must make our mind up about things."

Yes, we must, but *criticism* and *good judgment* are two very different things.

- ~ Good judgment requires that we have complete and reliable information, criticism doesn't require that.
- ~ Good judgment has no intention to do harm, criticism every intention to do harm.
- ~ Good judgment holds itself responsible, criticism is irresponsible.
- ~ Good judgment has a building component inherent in it, criticism has a destructive component built in.

Criticism is like sniping and shooting, then running off to leave your victim to lay. It doesn't stay around to answer the questions. It is not helpful --it is not intended to be.

Sometimes it is just careless. It is a spirit that overcomes people --like shooting a deer for the sport of it, then leaving it lay. There is no good in it.

***Fourthly, criticism is wrong because, there is another and a better way to treat our opponents.***

"Speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15).

If we are to win our opponents, then Jesus gives us the only idea that can work:

"But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).

"Hatred stirreth up strifes: but love covereth all sins" (Prov. 10:12).

"Love suffereth long, and is kind" (I Corinthians 13:4).

"And be ye kind one to another" (Ephesians 4:32).

"Speak evil of no person, do not brawl, but be gentle, show all meekness unto all people. For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving different lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another" (Titus 3:2-3).

We did that, we have had dumb ideas, we have had false ideas, we have acted badly....

Then who are we to criticize? Don't criticize. You cannot *win* an argument.

In Christian service, remember: **We Want to Win People**, not arguments.