

CHRISTIANS IN THE CRITICS' CORNER

James 2:8; 4:11-12

James 2:8: Indeed, if you keep the royal law prescribed in the Scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing well. **James 4:11-12:** Don't criticize one another, brothers. He who criticizes a brother or judges his brother criticizes the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹²There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?"

INTRODUCTION

Recently, a Canadian church appeared to be thriving. Numerous outreach ministries yielded a rich harvest of new believers and about 500 people were attending services. But church growth then stagnated. Members were leaving the church as quickly as new people were joining. Research revealed the majority who left were not attending another church; they just stopped going to church altogether. Therefore, despite its success at evangelism, this church was actually de-evangelizing the neighborhood by its inability to hold its members. Most of those who left were almost impossible to bring back into *any* community of faith.

Realizing something must be done to reverse this tragic trend, the senior pastor invited the last 12 people he'd baptized to supper at his home. They were all new Christians and excited by his invitation. After supper, he sat them down and asked if they wanted to know the future. They all said "Yes!" enthusiastically. He informed them that, statistically speaking, "In the next 2-3 years two of your marriages will have broken up and the shame will cause you to leave the church. Three of you will have a conflict with someone in the church and you will leave the church. One will have a tragedy, lose faith and leave; two will have a moral failing and leave; two of you will lose your commitments to church fellowship and drift away. Thus, in 2-3 years, only two of you will be attending church and only one of you will still be at this church." There was dead silence in the room. All these wide-eyed Christians were about to say, "Surely not I, Lord," as the Twelve told **Jesus** when He announced one would "betray" Him (**Matthew 26:22**). One of them spoke up and asked, "What can we do to change the statistics?" The pastor said, "You can get together and decide as a group you are not going to let anyone go." This is exactly what they did. These strangers supported each other as a group through their tragedies, conflicts, divorces, and personal failings. In four years, only one left the church never to come back. This church went from losing 10 out of every 12 converts to losing only one.

This story reveals a major reason why churches across North America are losing many of their members. What's most disturbing is not that these believers experienced divorce, moral failings, and conflicts with other church members, or suffered stunning tragedies that shook their faith in God's goodness and love, as sad as all these situations are. What's most disturbing is that when they most needed their church family's embrace, they felt abandoned by their church. A close relative my age made a saving commitment to **Jesus** before I did. But he foolishly married a non-Christian girl with strange views about God, life, and marriage. He endured some stormy years with her but determined to remain faithful to his marriage vows, until his wife deserted him and filed for divorce. **I Corinthians 7:15** makes allowance for such cases, declaring, "[I]f the unbeliever leaves, let him leave. A brother or a sister is not bound in such cases." In other words, my relative was free to go on with his life without undue shame and to serve Christ with his best efforts from then on, as he has done. But his closest associates at church treated him like damaged goods, assuming his divorce must largely be his fault. He became so disillusioned by such insensitive, critical mistreatment at the hands of his church friends that he dropped out of church for years. Thankfully, through the kindness of compassionate, caring Christian family and friends, his heart healed. For the past 35 years, he's been an exemplary credit to the Savior he loves!

Today's message, Christians in the Critics' Corner, considers The Causes and The Cure of Criticism.

I. THE CAUSES OF CRITICISM

"Do not criticize one another,"; "Do not speak against" (NASB), "speak evil of" (NKJV), or "slander one another" (NIV). The Greek verb translated in these various ways, which appears three times in **vs. 11**, combines two Greek words meaning "against" and "speak." Its noun form is translated "backbiting" by the KJV in **II Corinthians 12:20**. The *Society of Automotive Engineers Journal* once ran this little nugget on its pages: "Criticism is the one thing most of us think is more blessed to give than to receive."

Who received more criticism than anyone else in **Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John**? **Jesus** did. **Jesus** could have identified with the *Peanuts* character Linus, Lucy's younger brother. Linus is intelligent and wise, despite his youth and almost always being seen holding his blue security blanket. He acts as the comic strip's philosopher and theologian, often quoting the Gospels. In one scene, Linus is curled up in a chair innocently reading a book. Lucy stands behind him with a funny look on her face. She says, "It's very strange. It happens just by looking at you." "What happens?" Linus asks. Lucy replies, "I can feel a criticism coming on." We know the reasons why the religious leaders faulted **Jesus**: *jealousy* over how He displaced them in the minds of many people who valued His teachings over theirs; *envy* over His ability to draw crowds and inspire mass devotion; *anger* over His exposure of their hypocrisy; *resentment* over **Jesus'** ability to bring God's miraculous power to bear upon the spiritual, physical, and earthly needs of all who truly opened their hearts to God. Yet, some in **Jesus'** immediate family thought, at times, "He's out of His mind" and second-guessed Him (**Mark 3:20-21; John 7:2-5**), as did His closest followers. The only person who ever walked this earth and perfectly followed God's will at every step had many, many people in His critics' corner.

Warren Wiersbe, in his book *Angry People*, urges us to look at ourselves before we judge the scribes and Pharisees too harshly for incessant criticisms of how **Jesus** failed to live up to *their standards* of right and wrong. Wiersbe cautions that many Christians go to church to find fault, gossip, or criticize, rather than to allow God's Spirit to convict, inspire, and transform us into more Christlike disciples. Wiersbe cites an incident in the life of Dr. Joseph Parker, the great British preacher who died in 1902. His sermons were so remarkable that others insisted many of them must be published. One Sunday, a church member described in great detail a "grammatical error" he'd made. Joseph Parker asked the man, "And what else did you get out of the message?" His critic became flustered. His nitpicking had so preoccupied him that he became deaf to what God wanted to speak to his heart that day on how to live more like **Jesus**.

"Indeed, if you keep the royal law prescribed in the Scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing well. Don't criticize one another, brothers. He who criticizes a brother or judges his brother criticizes the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.¹² There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?" By these words, James puts his finger upon the main cause behind ungodly criticism, aside from our personal biases and resentments: we assume we have a right to "judge" others in ways that violate "the royal law prescribed in the Scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself." We believe we are entitled not only "to render an opinion, as would a judge, condemning someone or something as guilty in God's eyes"; we also believe we are qualified to pronounce *sentence* upon this person. No one but God has this right. God did not give us His laws so we could condemn *others* when they violate God's will. God gave us His laws to show us where *we* violate His will. Even when we see someone defying or ignoring His laws, such as those specified in the Ten Commandments, are we truly qualified to declare what punishment or restitution God demands of the offender? Religious leaders who "brought a woman caught in adultery" to **Jesus** were 100% sure they knew what God demanded concerning the woman, yet **Jesus** proved them 100% wrong (**John 8:2-11**). **Jesus** possessed God's exclusive knowledge of the circumstances behind this incident, what motivated the hearts of her accusers, and the longings for forgiveness and a new life in this guilty woman's heart. Only God can judge others fairly in every situation, because only God knows the full truth about every situation. A wise teacher sent a note home to all parents on the first day of school. It read: "If you promise not to believe everything your child says happens at school, I'll promise not to believe everything your child says happens at home."

We often unfairly criticize others for failing to live up to God's standards when we are really imposing *our* pet peeves or personal resentments upon them. By faulting others, we often lay claim to possessing God-like abilities to know the truth about their guilt, without being misled by mere appearances, and we claim God's prerogative to pass sentence upon them. We also seek to blame others to escape blame being directed at us. Canadian Presbyterian minister Isaac Murray (1824-1906) illustrated the motivation behind much fault-finding: A dog hitched to a lawn mower stopped pulling to bark at a passerby. The boy guiding the mower said, "Don't mind the dog; he is just barking for an excuse to rest. It is easier to bark than to pull the mower." Do we ever seek to excuse our faulty attitudes or actions by barking criticism at others?

II. THE CURE OF CRITICISM

Aristotle (384-22 B.C.) declared, "It's easy to avoid criticism: all you have to do is say nothing, do nothing, be nothing." Perhaps the motto of malcontents should be, "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil." Today this expression is often used to describe someone who doesn't want to be involved in a situation. It may have originally been a proverb to remind us not to be so snoopy, so nosy, and so gossipy about others. Isaac Newton's Third Law of Motion is: "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." There's also a law of demotion (put down): "For every action, there is an equal and opposite criticism." Positive Presentation Management (PPM) is a technique for discussing or criticizing ideas in the business world. The basic rule: You must state two plus points before you can state a minus. This helps to insure the criticism is fair and discourages excessive negativism. Would this transform our speech as Christians if we followed the rule of stating two things positive about anyone before we allow ourselves to say anything negative?

James' warnings against destructive speech are rooted in the 9th Commandment of **Exodus 20:16**: "Do not give false testimony against your neighbor." This prohibits all false statements against others that we utter as though they are proven fact, including lying and giving unfounded evidence in a legal investigation. **Leviticus 19:16-18** (NASB) reveals it's impossible to "love your neighbor as yourself," which **James 2:8** identifies as part of "the royal law prescribed in Scripture" (meaning its binding upon Christians and Jews), if we're guilty of such unfounded falsehoods: "You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people, and you are not to act against the life of your neighbor; I am the LORD. ¹⁷ You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. ¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD." These verses couch the right God gives you to "reprove your neighbor" with warnings against spreading slander, nursing hatefulness, or seeking revenge. God thus gives us a threefold test to guide us when we should criticize and when we shouldn't. Ask ourselves three questions: (1) Am I motivated by an earnest desire for the welfare of the person I think needs correcting? (2) Am I going to face this person honestly, but gently? (3) Do I find the task thoroughly disagreeable, or am I secretly getting some pleasure out of it? Abraham Lincoln said, "He has the right to criticize who has the heart to help."

CONCLUSION

In 1980, Bill Brodherst hadn't run in a race since high school when he decided to train for the Pepsi Challenge 10k in Omaha, Nebraska. Bill Rodgers, the American marathon record holder and winner of three straight Boston Marathons, would also be competing. Brodherst wanted to be able to tell others he'd run in a race beside the great Bill Rodgers. But he'd been struck down in the prime of life with a burst aneurysm that led doctors to question if he'd ever walk again, let alone run. With a determination few equal, Bill took on the impossible to meet this challenge. He did learn to walk, though he needed to drag one foot behind him. His running was not much different. One foot ahead, drag the other up; one foot ahead, drag the other up.

On a misty July morning, 1981, at 9:04 A.M., 1200 runners began the race. Early on, Bill could see the mass of runners growing faint in the distance. For a time, people politely cheered his slow, shuffling gait. Then the crowds gradually disappeared, but Bill Brodherst pushed on alone toward the halfway point. Most runners passed him going the other way toward the finish line. As expected, Bill Rodgers won this event in

the time of 29.5 minutes. Most runners finished in under an hour. When Brodherst reached the halfway point, everyone else had left assuming there were no more runners. He dragged himself to the marker, placed both hands on it, and then turned to make his way back toward the finish marker. He became the forgotten man. Kids on street corners—mindless of the aneurism he'd suffered and his grit to beat the odds to allow him even to walk again, let alone run—taunted and imitated his struggling movement. "Hey, mister, they went that away!" "What's wrong, mister? Did you get lost?" "Give it up, Gimp." Bill had never run this far before. His left side grew numb. He endured pain with every step. But he knew there was purpose to his suffering, so he couldn't and wouldn't quit.

Bill Brodherst plugged away for nearly two hours before the finish line came in sight. The few onlookers still milling around began to recognize his achievement and to applaud this courageous warrior. It was as if his determination represented something in each of them that had always wanted to stay the course when defeat seemed ready to beat them. Jeers became cheers: "You can do it! Keep going! Don't give up now!" As he crossed the finish line ready to collapse, a sound of applause and cheering came out of an alley. Several of the race's participants were returning from celebration activities, led by Bill Rodgers. Quick to realize the significance of what they saw, they rushed forward, took Brodherst on their shoulders, and carried him for a distance. When they set him down, Rodgers took the medal he'd won from around his neck, placed it over the head of Bill Brodherst, and said, "You're the hero of this race. You deserve the medal."

Too often, our criticism of others reveals more about our deficiencies of fact and compassion than about the shortcomings of those we criticize. If we fully understood the reasons behind another's apparent shortcomings, we'd often be cheering, rather than jeering. If we'd had to overcome the difficulties of the one we criticize, we may not have succeeded nearly as well. "Don't criticize one another, brothers. . . .¹² There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?"