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1 Corinthians 4:1-5

1 Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries.

2 Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.

3 But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. 4 I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.

5 Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God.

“CONSTRUCTIVE” CRITICISM

There is one phrase that I have always dreaded, constructive criticism.

In my experience criticism often doesn't seem very constructive. And yet there is a critic in every crowd and every family.

“You're not going to wear that to church are you?”

“I like what I'm wearing. It looks good that way. Besides this shirt is comfortable.”

“That shirt needs to go in the rag pile. You should be ashamed to go out in public dressed like that.”

Criticism, it is with us wherever we go.

People criticize what we wear, how we talk and what we do. Criticism is a part of daily life.

And in some cases criticism is warranted. I must admit that some of us (I won't mention any names) do need a little help when it comes to our wardrobe.

But, criticism can easily get out of hand.

2

Some people think that it is their duty to criticize almost everything that we do. Not a week goes by that I don't counsel with a person who is having deep psychological problems because a parent or a spouse or a boss has been too critical.

I'm no different.

I've had my fair share of critics. And like everyone else I'm still learning how to deal with criticism.

Criticism, even though we might label it constructive is often destructive.

Critics can make us feel guilty. Critics can make us feel ashamed. Critics can make us feel incompetent.

And, worst of all, our critics are sometimes right!

How can we cope with our critics?

There are two mistakes we can make when it comes to our critics.

DON'T IGNORE

First, we can ignore them completely.

You can readily understand why that's not a good idea. Critics can give us valuable information about mistakes that we may have made.

And if our critics are willing to help us change in some way, criticism can actually be constructive.

I think the key to making criticism constructive is to try and make it a mutual process in which people work on a problem together.

I am much more likely to change if all the blame is not laid on my doorstep. I am more likely to change if there is some opportunity to work together toward a satisfactory resolution of the issue.

Take the "you're not going to wear that" example. A less biting criticism might be to say with a smile,

“You’ve had that shirt a long time. Maybe it’s time for us to go shopping.”

But, of course there are those who can’t take a hint, and there are critics who love to make their points in as nasty a way as possible.

Some TV and radio shows are highly rated simply because they criticize with ridicule and biting satire.

If you happen to agree with them the show is great. If you disagree you get really mad.

And I think this confrontational style of criticism has become a part of our culture and (unfortunately) in many cases a part of church life.

Dealing with critics and criticism is becoming more and more difficult.

DON'T TAKE CRITICS TOO SERIOUSLY

And that brings me to my second point.

Though it is not a good idea to ignore our critics, we must be very sure that we do not take them too seriously. We cannot act as if they have the last word and are always right.

To put it another way, we cannot let critics become our judges.

People who have psychological problems often make this mistake. They empower their critics by taking them too seriously.

Some people don’t make a distinction between criticism and judgment. If someone criticizes them in any way they fall apart. They immediately think that they are being “judged.”

Criticism, at least constructive criticism should not be taken in that way. People can give us their opinion, and we should listen. But, it is up to us to decide if the criticism is helpful or warranted.

4

On the other hand judgment is something else. Judgment is final. Judgment leaves no room for discussion.

When you're in court and the judge slams that gavel down, there is no choice. The judgment has been made, and you're going to obey that ruling.

But, aside from the courtroom there are very few areas in life where judgment is final. We can listen to our critics, but we must never give them a power that they do not have on their own, the power to be our judges.

PAUL AND HIS CRITICS

That's what Paul is saying in our lesson for today.

These past few Sundays we've learned that the Apostle had more than his fair share of critics in Corinth. It's not a surprise.

Paul was very critical of what the congregation at Corinth was doing.

Paul criticized their divisiveness. Paul criticized their immoral behavior. Paul criticized their faulty theology. Paul even criticized their worship style.

He even said that they were a bunch of babies! They needed to grow up so that he could talk to them like adults!

If you think that you need to criticize someone, be prepared; the criticism will be given right back to you. And that's what happened to Paul.

The Corinthians were not happy with the Apostle. And his next visit to that church would be very painful.

You see, it's not only hard to receive criticism; it's also hard (if you care about someone) to give criticism.

You know that no matter how carefully you select your words they can and often will be misunderstood.

Sometimes we avoid saying the hard things that we need to say to someone because we don't want to deal with the fallout. We don't want to deal with the

criticism that will inevitably come our way.

But, Paul was not that kind of person. He was quick to point out problems in the churches that he served.

Some folks in our Bible study suggested that Paul might have been a bit harsh in his criticism, that his choice of words was not always the best. Perhaps that is true.

But, we need to remember that Paul did not start out to write Holy Scripture. He was just trying to write a letter to a church that was having problems.

And his human emotions and mistakes are apparent in his letters.

Certainly if there were people attacking me like they were attacking Paul, I suspect that I too would be a bit emotional and defensive in my approach to the problem.

I have struggled to help churches that were having problems. And though I tried my best to help sometimes I made people mad.

Sometimes my word choice has not always been the best. When I look back on what I have said and written I realize that I've made many mistakes.

But, does this mean that we say nothing at all?

Does that mean that we avoid situations where there might be conflict? Does our fear of criticism prevent us from engaging others in a meaningful way?

No.

I would say that we should not let a fear of criticism prevent us from saying what we believe to be true.

If we believe that no man or woman is our judge, then it empowers us to open up a dialogue in which we criticize others and in which others in turn criticize us.

HUMAN JUDGMENT

Paul told the Corinthians that he took criticism with a grain of salt. It was a small thing when other men and women criticized him. Paul didn't even take his own self-criticism too seriously.

There's too much that we don't know about other people. We can't judge them.

I have found that when I have been tempted to judge someone else, I have often regretted it later on. I have learned something about that person and their circumstances that have caused me to understand why they did what they did.

In many cases my judgmental attitude said more about me than it did about them.

And even though we think that we know ourselves, quite often our true motives for acting in a certain way are hidden from us. We can be too easy on ourselves, attributing good motives to what are essentially selfish actions.

And we can be too hard on ourselves.

We can take all the criticisms that come our way as a final statement on who we are and what we can do. We can let others be our judge.

Very seldom do we judge others or ourselves accurately.

Paul said that when you come right down to it no one on this earth could really judge us.

Only the Lord can judge. Only the Lord understands us completely.

The Lord knows what we are like, inside and out. The Lord knows everything ... good, bad and indifferent.

Most of us find this to be a bit frightening.

DIVINE JUDGMENT

In an effort to avoid divine judgment we quote all those passages that suggest we should not judge. We say judge not lest you be judged. We say let he who is without sin cast the first stone.

We say this not because we want to be gracious to others. We just want to give ourselves a free pass.

We want to believe that God will forgive us. After all He's in the forgiving business. Right?

But, it's not that simple.

God is not fooled by our attempts to put lipstick on a pig. God knows what we are really like.

The Bible tells us that even our best actions are often laced with selfish deceit and are like filthy rags in the sight of God. All of us have sinned and fall short of God's glory. (Romans 3:23; Isaiah 64:6)

And yet the one who can truly judge us is also the one who truly loves us.

The Bible teaches us that God's justice and God's love are two sides to the same coin. God judges us as an expression of His love.

God loves us too much to leave us where we are. All of us are on a journey in which we are judged by grace.

This doesn't mean that we can do whatever we want to do with no consequences.

On the contrary it means that grace compels us to live in a different way. Grace compels us to be gracious in the way we treat others.

Next Sunday on the Mount of Transfiguration we will once again begin that long trek toward the cross. On that cross Jesus was judged by his people to be deserving of death.

But, what the critics did not know is that as they condemned Jesus to death, God was in Jesus bearing their judgment.

In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. That's easy to say, but it was hard to do. It was a costly death. It was a costly sacrifice. The road to reconciliation was the road to Calvary.

And the road to our salvation must take the same hard and winding path. The road to salvation is a rocky road filled with people who would criticize us unfairly. The road to salvation is filled with those who want to judge us in a harsh way.

But, we know where the road ends. It does not end with criticism, either theirs or ours. The road ends with a Savior, who says,

“Father, forgiven them. They don't know what they are doing.”

FINAL JUDGMENT

Those were some of the last words that Jesus said before he was “crucified, dead and buried.”

But, the Creed also tells us that he ascended into heaven and from heaven one day he will come to *judge* the living and the dead.

We say that every week when we say the Creed. Why is that important? In our lesson for today Paul reminds the Corinthians (and us) that we live in between the times.

Christ has come and he is coming again. And that second coming of Christ should have implications for how the church acts in the present and thinks about the future.

Today we live in the dark. But, one day the light will dawn. One day we will see clearly as now only God sees.

Many people present the last day as a time of trembling and fear. And indeed there are images of the last day in the Bible that support this view. But, notice that Paul in our lesson for today does not seem to emphasize this apocalyptic view of the future.

Yes, all our secrets will be revealed, and this might be a cause for fear and trembling. But, Paul does not approach that last day with dread.

On the contrary Paul talks about a God who commends (not condemns) his people at the end (4:5).

One commentator put it this way,

“We all have to live with critics. That’s life. But the only critic who is qualified to be our judge is the Lord himself. And the good news about our divine judge is that he refuses to condemn us.

Let me put it in the apostle’s own words: there is therefore no condemnation. No condemnation. No condemnation at all ...” for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).

Earlier in his first letter to the Corinthians (1:8) Paul said that God would strengthen his saints to the end so that they might be found blameless when they meet Christ.

Paul is confident that the end of time is in the hands of the one who was crucified for his sins.

As Paul would put it in his second letter to the Corinthians, the sinless one took upon himself the sins of the world. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

The Christ coming to meet us has already died our death.

There will be no songs of gloom on the last day.
Instead, there will be joy in the air as the earthly shadows give way to a blinding heavenly light.

Good judgment upon a world that will be restored by her Maker.

Amen.