

Sermon: How to deal with criticism?

2 Corinthians 5:6-17

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As Christians we are quite good at being judgmental. Maybe this is because we have high standards - and who is good enough? Maybe it is because we prefer the other to look worse than we do - as we are a bit insecure. Or maybe we just do not like that other person.

For whatever reason, every now and then we are very critical of others, just as we are sometimes criticized very unfairly. It hurts, and it is really very poisonous in a community that aims at following Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul was under heavy attack in the church of Corinth. He was seen as not being spiritual enough, not impressive enough, just not as wonderful as some of the latest Christian leaders that had arrived in town.

Paul does not take the criticism lightly. He defended himself, because his reputation as a servant of the Lord was at stake. And from his defense, we can learn some important lessons for how we should deal with one another.

Judgment seat of Christ

First, the apostle points at the judgment seat of Christ and the fear of the Lord. It is this fear of the Lord that motivates Paul in his relationship with the church and with all Christians.

We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. What does this mean?

Paul uses a metaphor that all people in Corinth knew very well. In the middle of the market in Corinth was a large stone elevation, called the *bema*, the judgment seat, where the pro-consul of the city would sometimes judge between people. Visit Corinth today and in the ruins of the ancient city you can still see this judgment seat.

Paul himself had to appear before proconsul Lucius Julius Gallo on his judgment seat in that city of Corinth. In Acts 18 we read about this; Lucius heard complaints against Paul, but he dismissed the case.

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The Corinthian *bema*, in the middle of the market, was also used for crowning the victorious athletes of the regular Corinthian games. The judge at the *bema* bestowed rewards to the victors - he did not whip the losers.

Likewise, this judgment seat of Christ is the reward ceremony for us who have finished running the Christian race of life. We have arrived. Will we now get a medal? Will we get flowers? Some will enter eternity to be with God with praise, others with some shame.

This judgment seat is not about heaven or hell; that has been settled at Golgotha for those who trust in him.

But even though we know that through faith we are safe in the hands of our Lord Jesus Christ, we must not underestimate the gravity of this event. Paul speaks in this regard about the fear of the Lord. This fear of the Lord is not the fear of a dog that fears a harsh whipping, but rather, the fear of a person who does not want to stand ashamed for his actions in front of the one who loves him so much.

Who wants to face his Lord who died for him, and then come to the realization that while He died for us, we were not prepared to live for him?

That solemn moment, and the rewards of being getting wide access into life with God, must make us prioritize carefully. 'We make it our aim to please him', says Paul, 'for the fear of the Lord.'

To please God should be our goal, our true ambition. It is so easy to fill our lives with trivial pursuits - but all human pursuits must be submitted to this one primary goal - to please Him.

Paul writes these things because he is unhappy about how he is being criticized. He tells them, take care, you will have to give account of how you lived. There is judgment.

We must be careful in our critique of others. We will have to give account of how we treated other children of God - how we treated all people really. Have we shown love? Or were our relations full of venom.

These others that we are critical of will also appear before the Lord, and he will ask them to give account for their life. You do not have to do that job for God. He is more than able to deal with those people who, in your mind, underperform.

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And if you feel low or angry because people are critical of you, be comforted that your Lord knows your motives and he knows you best. And it may sometimes be better to leave it at that.

And yet at other times, you may need to defend your integrity. That is exactly what Paul did with his letter. But he was able to rest in the certainty that God is our judge. So sometimes we can let people accuse and talk, it is not that important in the eternal scheme of things.

His love motivates us

Beside this fear of the Lord, the knowledge of judgment, Paul mentions love as the motive for his actions towards others. The knowledge that our Lord Jesus Christ loves you, should be strong motivator for behavior.

'The love of Christ for us controls us', Paul says. In general, this means, that the knowledge of His love for us impacts the way we live. His example of love, makes us love others. If that is true, being very critical of other people is problematic. If Christ loves people that should compel us to do likewise.

But Paul does not talk of the love of Christ in a sort of general way; he points specifically at his death for us. The death of Christ on our behalf impacts the way we ought to view ourselves and our fellow Christians.

I would not have minded it at all if Paul had written a bit more on the topic - he is hard to follow here as he writes in some sort of theological shorthand.

'Christ died for all; therefore all have died.'

Think of your baptism. Our baptism identified us with his death, by faith. He died so that we, who have died with him in baptism, do not have to face eternal death. We are already dead. And those other Christians, who you are so critical of, they have also died with Christ - because he died for all.

"And he died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him."

In baptism we died, but we have to also risen again. That is the idea of baptism. We die as part of the old community of sinful Adam; we wake up in the new world as part of the second Adam, Jesus Christ.

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We are to live for him, that is, to pattern our life after him. How do we do that? Certainly not by living with grudges and criticism for people who are part of the same body, who have also died and risen again with our Lord Christ.

His love controls us; we live for him. How will that impact our mutual relations? Paul is asking his critics to bite their tongues; he is telling us that we must be so careful not to damage the people Jesus Christ died for.

He gave us a new life, with new ideals and new purposes. There should be no place for the venom of infighting, hateful attitudes, and unkind responses.

Yes sure that is hard. Tell me something.

If it were easy the Holy Scriptures would not be full of admonishments to make love the criterion to live by... We are not very good at this.

New Creation

Paul concludes with a 'therefore', in verse 16. Based on what he has said thus far, ,

Therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh.

And one sentence later, he says the same thing in other words,

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

These two statements after the 'therefore' explain each other.

We regard no-one according to the flesh, means, that in Christ we are new people and we have to look at each there in the light of this renewal.

What does it mean to look at someone 'according to the flesh'? The critics of Paul thought he was not spiritually impressive enough. He faced difficulties. His life was not glorious; he suffered. That is the superficial view.

We might also say, it is looking at someone's beauty, power, bank account, his race, his abilities, her job, his influence. Or looking at the shortcomings of other people only. Looking at their faults while we forget our own...

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And also, it is looking at people as a means to our personal end, as instruments for what we want to achieve, and not as brothers and sisters in their own right, very imperfect but beloved by Christ.

Is this, by the way, not often also the way we look at ourselves? I am a failure. I am not good enough. I am not as successful as the other. I will never be good enough for God.

We judge others and we judge ourselves by criteria that have nothing to do with our Lord.

Let us look at ourselves with his criteria, and let us live by those criteria. Criteria marked by love. All that God wants from us has already been written all over it. Then we are perfectly prepared to face the judgment seat of Christ.

As Christians, we are not blind to the faults of others, and we do see our own faults. But these are not the ultimate criterion. In the light of God's judgment, in the light of the cross, in the light of the love of Christ for all, we see a new creation in the other. Someone made new by God.

Surely, those others are not perfect and they still have much to learn on the way of Christ. But hey, come on. Look at yourself. Let us look at ourselves. In the light of Christ and his death for us, our moral stature is dwarfed. And we focus on the love and forgiveness of God. He made us new people.

And this generosity that we apply to ourselves, we must also apply to others. Yes some people in church are - objectively speaking - not likable at all. Yes, and? As Christians we go beyond our primary feelings, together with our Lord who loved the unlovable and who died for his critics.

Being a Christian means having a new worldview with the living Christ at the heart, and a new lifestyle, one of generosity to others, even to others with their flaws.

Just as we also accept ourselves with our flaws.

Conclusion

Together we are part of God's new creation. The true and complete fulfillment of this will be in the future, but even today, we try to live in accordance with that future - that is our aim, our ambition.

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God will hold us accountable for how we live; it must be motivated by the love of Christ. The practical outworking of this is that we let go of our critical attitude to others.

And if others are not behaving to us as we would like them to, we try not to respond in kind. Think of the accounts; think of the love of Christ. And live as someone who is baptized.

We died for the old tired worn out world with its hatred and venom; with Jesus we came to live in his world where love rules supreme.