

CRITICAL CORINTHIANS
1 Corinthians 4:1-5

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Christianity Today writer, Ed Stetzer, was reflecting upon criticisms he received after preaching a sermon. He invited other preachers to answer the question, “What’s the strangest thing anyone has said to you after a sermon?” Here is what he received:

Pastor Liam Thatcher was told, “I couldn’t focus for the entire talk coz you were wearing new glasses.”

Pastor Scott Slaton heard, “Your preaching has gotten worse since your baby was born. It’s like you’re not as passionate about God as you were before.”

Jason Spears was informed, “Coming from my other church and my former pastor to here, listening to you is like going from filet mignon to ground beef hamburger meat.” Jason’s response? “Unfortunately, in my youthful insecurity, the next week I handed her a small bottle of A1 Steak Sauce and encouraged her to go back if she saw fit.”

Jeff Chandler heard, “You’re not like most pastors; when you say that you sin – we believe you.”

And, finally, Joe Puentes was told, “You talk too much about Jesus in your sermons. I’m going to attend another church.”

(www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2018/june)

Some in the church at Corinth were saying that Paul can’t really be a great apostle because he’s suffering. “Real apostles rise above suffering,” they say. And Paul has been somewhat indirect in his loving response until chapter 4. Here he becomes quite candid, rejecting their premature evaluation of both him and his ministry.

Tom (N.T.) Wright remembers as a little boy he would look over the workbench where his father would whittle away at pieces of wood. He said his eyes were just high enough to peer up and see what his father was doing. At about eight years of age, he was puzzled at one particular carving. “What on earth could Dad be doing?” The work seemed to have no purpose. No beauty. No reason. He was just cutting, very slowly, and more and more tiny shavings were coming off an already very thin spike. “Surely when Dad’s finished there will be nothing left of this carving. Why doesn’t he stop?” little Tom thought to himself.

Tom remembers saying something to his father, even at eight years of age, that was critical and questioning. It’s difficult when you see a job half done. His father made no reply. But a few days later, his father’s whittling made sense. Eight year old Tom came down to breakfast, and there on

the table was a model ship inside of a bottle. What he had witnessed was his father carving one of the last spars – a tiny, but perfect part of an elegant ship now inserted in the traditional fashion into the belly of a bottle. The ship’s masts were gloriously raised so that all who look upon it will wonder how it ever was crafted in the bottle. Once inside the bottle, the shipbuilder knows when he pulls the specific thread in just the right way that everything in the bottle will stand up at last and all will make sense as the ship stands within the bottle in its glory.

At no other stage during the “ship in the bottle” building process does any of it make sense. Not until the final stage – a stage which his father purposely did when the rest of the family was snuggled in bed and out of the way.

Paul is saying something like that in this passage. There is going to be a final judgment. God is a good and just God. And, yes, the world needs to be put to rights, but you can’t make sense of it now, any more than an eight-year-old curious boy can make sense of a single spar being whittled away by his father, unless he knows that it belongs to the ship in the bottle. The problem is that we want to make everything right prematurely. We want to pay off old scores ahead of time. We think we know what God should do, and we’re eager to give Him advice and to tell others about it too.

Some in Corinth were that way. They thought their new status as Christians, coupled with the world’s wisdom, gave them the right to pass judgment on people, including Paul himself. And, quite frankly, Paul doesn’t measure up to what they think a fully-fledged Christian teacher should be like. Could you imagine that? And so, they’re going to pass judgment on him.

What is Paul’s response? Well, not many people know because the common lectionary omits this material. Why? Because Paul is sarcastic, scolding; portrays authentic Christian life as one of deprivation and suffering; employs patriarchal rhetoric to assert his own authority; and immodestly calls his readers to imitate him (v. 16). And finally, in verse 21, he threatens to beat them with a rod if they don’t fall into line – figuratively speaking, I hope.

Not a very popular passage, indeed.

Up until this point, much of Paul’s discourse has been artfully indirect, employing metaphors and irony to provoke the Corinthians to rethink their position. In chapter 4, however, he takes off the wraps and confronts them bluntly on two points: their presumptuous judging of Paul himself (vs. 1-5) and their arrogant boasting of their own wisdom and status (vs. 6-13). In the final sentences, he adopts a warmer tone as a father appealing to his children (vs. 14-17), but then concludes with a stern warning to those at Corinth who may be inclined to resist his authority (vs. 18-21). This is not winsome material. On the whole, we tend to like Paul better when he is being less confrontational. The Corinthians may have felt the same way.

Paul’s first point is this:

I. The criteria of judgment is not success, but faithfulness (vs. 1-5).

What matters is not whether Paul is winning, but whether he is faithful. Oddly enough, we have a curious paradigm for judging ministers and ministry in America today. In fact, I would,

unfortunately, compare a pastor's job to that of a head football coach. He assembles the team of assistant coaches. He takes the church on the playing field. And, my goodness, he'd better win the game. And we all know what happens to coaches and pastors who don't "win."

But that's not the way Paul would judge ministry. He might not be winning in the eyes of the Corinthian congregation. But he says we are to be found not successful but, rather, trustworthy. Look at verse 2: "In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy."

The second thing Paul says is:

II. Any other evaluation outside of God's is not only wrong, but suspect.

What Paul says in verse 3 is, "It's no big deal to me that you criticize me or examine my work. I'm not interested in what human courts have to say. I don't even rightly examine myself."

Apparently, there were some in Corinth who were kind of like callers into a radio talk show. They had nothing better to do than to rate Paul's performance and compare him to other preachers. Paul brushes aside their criticism – and, indeed, the interrogation of any human court – as of no matter to him. In fact, Paul says, "In my own mind, I cannot be found innocent with any confidence."

On the contrary, listen to what Seneca (First Century Roman philosopher) wrote:

Can anything be more excellent than this practice of thoroughly sifting the whole day? And how delightful the sleep that follows this self-examination – how tranquil it is, how deep and untroubled, when the soul has either praised or admonished itself, and when this secret examiner and critic of self has given report of its own character! I avail myself of this privilege, and every day I plead my cause before the bar of self. (*De Ira* 3.36.2-3, as quoted in Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, p. 66)

Paul, however, would not place any real confidence in even a self-evaluation.

The third thing I want you to see in the passage is this:

III. When we judge the motives of others, we put ourselves in the seat of God (v. 5).

This is the same question Paul asks in Romans 4:24, "Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?" Paul is saying to the Corinthians, "Back off. It's none of your business. I will answer to God. Don't pronounce judgment before the Lord comes."

Now Paul is certain that judgment will come. But he says it is the Lord's to judge, and not ours before the time. Like the little boy judging the whittling before the ship is in the bottle, we should make no declaration before Christ should return to judge His own.

What is it that we're not to judge? We know in chapter 5 Paul is going to rebuke immorality, so it's not that we can't call sin "sin." Of course God's people are to declare sin as sin. And he rebukes them in chapter 5 when they don't. But we are wrong when we pass judgment on the motives of someone's heart. Look what he says. "The Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God" (verse 5).

It's so easy to judge other people – people who look different, talk different, believe different. People who aren't as nice as they should be. Some who are ungrateful. Some who don't witness enough. Some who don't preach like we preach. Some who don't listen to our style of music. Some who don't value our values or necessarily hold all our beliefs or toe our line. Their drummer beats differently, and they march off-course in our eyes. Their road diverged in yonder wood, and we don't understand why they took the path they took or where they are at now.

David Griffith makes this observation. “Judging others is unique among sins. All sin puts my will above God's, but judging one of His servants, our fellow laborers for Christ, attempts to put my will above God's and above God's will for that person. Other sin makes me my own god; judgmentalism makes me someone else's god.”

Paul believes that the inner workings of the human heart are something beyond the ability of any human being to finally judge. And even we, ourselves, can't judge our own hearts. We are accustomed to saying things like, “Nobody knows what's inside me but me.” Paul would say, “You don't even know. You're probably not even being honest with yourself. Only God knows the inner workings of your emotions and your heart.

When criticism comes, how do we respond?

I. Expect it.

He keeps bad company – always hanging around losers!

What a glutton and a drunkard!

He must be a lunatic!

Matthew 9, Matthew 11, Luke 7, John 8 – these are all things said about Jesus.

People criticized the Son of God?

The Holy One of Israel?

The Lord?

Yes, they did, and they will criticize you, too.

The Kimball Art Museum in Fort Worth displays many beautiful paintings. Among them is an oil canvas painted by Rembrandt in the 1600's. It is entitled “Portrait of a Young Jew.”

Beside the painting is a plaque that reads: “Few artists are as well-known and appreciated in our day as Rembrandt Van Rijn, yet at age 57, when he placed his signature on this picture, Rembrandt was seen by many of his contemporaries as an archaic painter of an outmoded tradition.”

Rembrandt's critics thought his painting was old-fashioned, and his style was out-of-date. Funny, isn't it? That the names of his critics are unknown yet the name of Rembrandt is known around the world centuries later.

"I don't want to be critical but. . ." Most of us are not at all excited about the rest of that sentence. Even though we know criticism can mean growth and change, why do we always take it in a destructive way and not at least try to use it in a constructive way?

But I have begun to realize that how you hear and handle criticism says a lot about who you are – it can mean the difference between personal and professional growth and alienation and stagnation.

Someone wrote the only way to avoid criticism is to do nothing, say nothing and be nothing.

Responses to Criticism

1. Deny it. Equate any criticism with total attack. We try to protect our self-esteem and, in doing so, we keep from growing. To be able to benefit from criticism we must be willing to be vulnerable. You don't have to present yourself as infallible. In fact, as co-workers see you taking heed to criticism – open to grow, their respect for you will increase.

2. Counterattack. Retaliation is the natural response to criticism. Pointing out why the criticism is invalid, illuminating the shortcomings of the one doing the criticizing. Of course, then we simply begin a debate, because the critic will not allow himself to be outdone. He feels as if his message has fallen on deaf ears, so he fires away with even larger ammunition.

3. Emotionally collapse/panic. The response of the insecure and the unsure. When we receive criticism as an attack against our total self, then we crumble. We cannot separate our individual weaknesses from our total person, so we crumble.

4. But best to just expect it. Criticism will come. You can be sure of that! Nothing is easier than fault-finding: no talent, no self-denial, no brains, and no character are required to get set up in the grumbling business. You can be sure that criticism will come.

Expect it!

I ask you: Can you remember a critical statement that has greatly affected your life? Ninety percent of us can.

Much has been said about critics. Channing Pollock said, "A critic is a legless man who teaches running."

George Bernard Shaw summed up a drama critic as "a man who leaves no turn unstoned."

Critics will always have a place in this world, but we have reached a weird time in history where they outnumber the people being critiqued. This has had a decided effect on those of us who stumble through each day without an advance copy of preview tape and who don't know how we feel about life until the reviews come out.

Before I go to a film, I have been informed by a critic that there is no plot. (This is right after he has revealed it to me.)

For weeks, someone looks forward to a new television series. Two nights before it airs, a critic writes its obituary. So why should I make time in my life for something that's not going to be there for me?

There are reviewers of symphonies, concerts, art shows and fund-raising events. I even read a column by a woman who reviews church sermons.

Every time the president speaks, his speech is followed by a group of critics who proceed to tell us what he said, how well he said it and what he didn't say.

The basic surprises of life are disappearing one by one. Any day now I expect to read a review of a wedding pointing out that the ceremony had little substance, the groom was miscast, and the bride's father admitted the production was over budget. (Erma Bombeck, "Criticizing the number of critics")

II. Evaluate it.

Paul did and found it wanting.

A farmer asked a restaurant owner if he could use a million frog legs. Desirous of putting frog legs on the menu more frequently, the owner asked the farmer where he could get so many. He replied, "My pond is overflowing with them. Their croaking is driving me up the wall." The restaurateur ordered several hundred frogs. A week later the farmer returned to the restaurant with a sheepish look on his face. "I was wrong about a million frogs." Holding up two scrawny frogs, he admitted, "These two little frogs were making all the racket. I never knew two frogs could sound like a million. (Leslie B. Flynn, *When the Saints Come Storming In*, as quoted in "A Couple of Croakers", *Our Daily Bread*, February 18, 1990)

Evaluate who is saying it.

Whenever you receive criticism, take a moment to see with the other person's eyes. They might be right. Have you noticed that it's easy for you to see the faults of others? There is someone in your workplace or school that everyone sees a particular fault in them, but they themselves do not see it. What about us? We, too, have faults – can't we stop and evaluate the possible truth of the criticism?

Evaluate the criticism. Is the person simply degrading you in order to build themselves up? "If we had no fault of our own, we should not take so much pleasure in noting those in others."

III. Employ it.

If one person calls you a horse – smile.

If a second person calls you a horse – think about it.

If a third person calls you a horse – buy a saddle.

People who benefit from criticism do not duck the critical comments thrown at them. They do not consider them a personal assault. They feel no need to even the score. Instead, they use criticism to better themselves, using the sharp blade of the critic to refine their skills.

Get a friend to tell you your faults, or better still, welcome an enemy who will watch you keenly and sting you savagely. What a blessing such an irritating critic will be to a wise man, what an intolerable nuisance to a fool! (Charles Spurgeon. Leadership – Vol. 3, #2.+)

IV. AVOID DOING IT YOURSELF.

A young musician's concert was poorly received by the critics. The famous Finnish composer Jean Sibelius consoled him by patting him on the shoulder and saying, "Remember, son, there is no city in the world where they have erected a statue to a critic." (Haddon Robinson, Denver, Colorado. Leadership – Vol. 7, #1.+)

It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled or where the doer of deeds could have done better.

The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement; and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat. (Theodore Roosevelt).

Don't make yourself God.