

"Coping With Our Critics"

I am going to talk with you about how to cope with people who set themselves up as your critics. We all have critics; I have had a fair share of them in my time. All of us have people around us who tell us whether we dress right, talk right, think right, or do right. Critics can make us feel guilty, or ashamed, or just plain incompetent if we let them. So one of the most important lessons about life that I, for one, am still learning, and maybe you are too is this: How to cope with our critics?

There are two mistakes people often make when they are trying to cope with their critics. One mistake is to ignore them. But the trouble with ignoring our critics is that we may discover that they were right and that we would have been better off if we had listened to them. So it is a mistake to ignore our critics. On the other hand, it is an even bigger mistake to take them too seriously to let them have the last word, as if they were our judges and were always right. The trick, then, is to listen to our critics, but never, never let our critics be our judges.

Here is the key. A critic is one thing. A judge is another. Critics give us their own opinion, and it is up to us to take it or leave it. But judges are different; when they deliver their judgment, we have no choice, we simply have to take it. This is why I say: listen to your critics, but never let them be your judges.

The Apostle Paul had his share of critics and what he said to his critics has always been helpful to me. I recommend it to you. You can find his words in the New Testament at the very beginning of the 4th chapter of I Corinthians. "With me it is a small thing that I should be judged by you or anybody else for that matter. I do not even judge myself. It is the Lord who judges me."

You will notice that he had three kinds of critics: first, other people, second, himself, and, third, the Lord. Three critics. We have the very same ones: other people, our own selves, and the Lord.

Let's first talk about our human critics: Our friends. People who go to our church. Our mothers. Even our own children. They can criticize us for just about everything. The apostle's critics, for instance, were carping at him for the way he carried on his missionary work. How did he respond? He simply said: "I am listening. I hear what you are saying. What you say matters to me. But when the chips are down, and you have had your say, your words are never the last word for me. You are not my judges."

When we let our critics become our judges, we let them decide whether we are good enough or beautiful enough to be loved and accepted. I knew a woman once who had just about everything a beautiful woman, fifty-ish, could want: besides being good looking, she was well educated, and wealthy, and on top of that she was a very good, generous human being.

But with all her fine qualities, she was miserable. Deeply depressed, sometimes thought of taking her own life. How did she get in that terribly sad state of mind? I will tell you. She got into that sad state of mind by letting her critics become her judges. She had lived her whole life to win their approval. She lived in fear that if she did not measure up to their judgments, she would not be good enough for anyone, especially God, to love her.

What happened to this wonderful woman? I am happy to say that she finally learned how to deal with her critics. She found the courage to say to them all: "I respect your criticism, but from now on, I will not let you be my judge."

Very often we have the hardest time when our critics are the very people we love and admire. When I was in college, I had a wonderful teacher whom I greatly admired. And I wanted his approval above almost every thing else. And if I did not have his approval I would be crushed. In short I was letting my professor and critic be my judge. It took me a long time to say to myself: "I want him to be my critic, I will always take his opinion seriously. But I will not let him be my judge." I can tell you that the day I decided that my college idol would not be my judge, I found a new freedom to follow my own path without worrying about what he thought of what I was doing.

Critics are a blessing. We can all profit from them. But they can be a curse if we let them be our judges.

Our second critic is our own self. God has made us with the ability to examine our own lives, to take stock of ourselves and be our own critics. The only way we will ever improve our lives is by being critical of ourselves. But, oh, we make a huge mistake if we become our own judges.

The apostle Paul knew this, so when he refused to let his critics be his judges, he added these words: I do not even judge myself.

It is important here to recall the difference between a critic and a judge: a critic gives you his or her opinion and you can accept it or you can reject it. But when a judge pronounces his or judgment, you are stuck with it.

The apostle was his own toughest critic. He took the measure of his own life and criticized himself very honestly. He said: "I find that I often do the very things that I do not really want to do. And I often fail to do the very things that, deep in my spirit, I really want to do." Yes, the apostle was his own toughest critic. And he urged us to examine ourselves and be critical of what we see in ourselves. But be our own judges? Not on your life.

We are simply not competent to judge ourselves. When we take stock of ourselves, we tend to see what we want to see. When we are feeling good about ourselves we want to see only the good things about ourselves. When we get down on ourselves we actually look for bad things in ourselves. How we see ourselves is always blurred by the mood we are in. When we feel good about ourselves, we are too easy on ourselves. When we feel down, depressed, we are too hard on ourselves. The Bible says that all our hearts are deceitful, and they never deceive us so badly as when we are trying to examine our own selves.

Besides, we are too complicated for us to understand ourselves even when we are honest with ourselves. The smartest psychiatrist in the world can spend five years with a patient and never really unravel the mystery of his patient's spirit. Look inside yourself, and you will find shadow and light, evil and goodness, ugliness and beauty, hate and love, all mixed up together like a tossed salad.

I worry about people who, when they look inside themselves, always come up feeling smug, and thoroughly pleased with themselves. I also worry about people who look inside themselves and come up feeling as if their souls were cesspools. Neither of them has seen themselves for what they really are.

Their mistake is not that they criticize themselves. Their mistake is that they judge themselves. I know good people who are going through life judging themselves to be flawed and blemished and hopeless persons. Yes, I worry about good people who judge themselves and always find themselves wanting.

On the other hand, I have known people who made a living by lying and cheating and stealing who convinced themselves that they were really models of good character. Yes, I worry about people judge themselves and always find themselves innocent.

No wonder the apostle Paul said to his critics: I not only refuse to let you be my judges, I do not judge myself. I criticize myself, but I do not judge myself.

Which leaves just one more critic: The Lord himself.

The apostle not only refused to let his human critics be his judges, he would not let himself be his own judge. But now comes the clincher. It was not as if he refused to be judged by anyone. He had a judge and told his critics who his judge was. He said: "My judge is the Lord."

Think for a moment. God is qualified to be our judge because he knows us right down to the core, knows everything there is to know about us, good, bad, and indifferent.

How can we live with the one critic who really has the competence to be our judge?

For myself, I have found that the way to live with my divine critic is to know that whenever he judges me, he also loves me, forgives me, and accepts me. Nothing I have ever done or ever will do can persuade God to reject me.

Jesus himself had critics who judged him to be deserving of the death penalty. But what his judges did not know, was that when they condemned Jesus to death, God himself was in Jesus bearing their judgment. And since that moment when God was judged, he is the God who forgives.

One last word. 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. There is only forgiveness. There is only love.