

THE FINE ART OF BEING CRITICAL

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Matthew 5:10-12, 43-44; 7:1,5

Dale Carnegie has come in for more than his fair share of good-natured ribbing since he published his first book, How To Skin Friends And Influential People. There! See what I mean? That popped out without even thinking. But while he has been the brunt of many jokes, it is nevertheless true that what he says makes sense.

In one of his books he has several short chapters on how to handle criticism when it is directed at you. He begins one of these chapters with a story about the Prince of Wales, who later became King Edward VIII of England. When he was fourteen years of age, the Prince attended Dartmouth College in Devonshire, a college that corresponds to our Naval Academy at Annapolis. During his early years there he had a tough time of it. He was constantly being kicked in the shins by the other naval cadets. When the Commodore of the College found out about the kicking incidents he summoned all the cadets together and asked them why the Prince had been singled out for such rough treatment.

After a lot of hemming and hawing, they finally confessed that someday when they themselves became commanders or captains of the King's navy, they wanted to be able to say they had kicked the King. In other words, they wanted to have some mark of distinction, some feeling of importance (Isa.59:2).

That's an interesting commentary on human nature, isn't it? But it is one we must not ignore...especially when we tackle the subject of criticism. For one of the initial things we need to learn in adjusting to the criticism of others is the fact that --

Sometimes Criticism Is a Sign of Accomplishment.

When Dr. Robert Hutchins was elected Chancellor of the University of Chicago at the age of

thirty, he was greatly criticized by other educators who frowned upon his ideas. When his aged father was asked to comment upon the tremendous wave of criticism directed toward his son, he responded with the simple statement,

“Remember, no one ever kicks a dead dog”.

That may not provide much consolation...but remember it the next time you are criticized. Remember that it's due to the fact that someone thinks you are important enough to be criticized. In their eyes you have accomplished something and are worthy of attention for “no one ever kicks a dead dog.”

When Admiral Perry was exploring the North Pole, he received a tremendous amount of publicity and acclaim which irritated his superior officers in Washington. They began to level all manner of unjust criticism at him in an effort to humiliate him. Their attacks became so violent that finally, in an effort to salvage his career, President McKinley had to personally endorse him and his mission.

Why was Admiral Perry so viciously attacked? Simply because he had the courage and determination to do something really worthwhile. If he had been an innocuous individual sitting at some obscure desk in the Navy Department in Washington, he would have been completely ignored. He would not have been important enough to arouse jealousy.

So remember...when you are criticized unjustly you are receiving a compliment in disguise. You have distinguished yourself in some way from the run-of-the-mill crowd. Therefore, you have aroused the jealousy and envy of others who do not share your success. A second way to handle criticism is to --

Expect It!

When I felt called of God to enter the field of evangelism, I was filled with fear and trepidation. It was during a time when evangelism was held in almost universal contempt. I must admit, of

course, that was one of the things which intrigued me about the idea of entering the field. I was bound and determined, in my own small way, to put evangelism on such a high plane it would be acceptable to everyone. I also knew, just as sure as sin, we would be misunderstood and criticized. So, I adopted a little motto I have carried with me ever since.

“Do your job and do it will,
Let ‘em yell...they’ll yell anyway.”

Or something like that! What I was trying to do was reconcile myself to the fact that, even under the best circumstances, we can expect criticism. Unless we are perfect, and none of us are, there is always something about us to be criticized.

Therefore, the healthy thing is to expect it so when it comes we are not shocked or wounded by it. By expecting it we will, as Carnegie says, “insulate ourselves to insult,” and thus the cutting edge of thoughtless words will leave us unmarred.

That does not mean we should dull our sensitivities to all criticism. Absolutely not! When it comes to us in a Christ-like, constructive way we can learn from it and better ourselves by it.

Walt Whitman asks,

“Have you learned lessons only of those who admire you, and were
tender with you, and stood aside far you? Have you not also
learned great lessons from those who rejected you, and braced
themselves against you, or disputed the passage with you?”

Let us thank God for those who love us enough to help us see our faults and thus overcome them. But let us also recognize that unless we become a vacuum...a bubble...a mere non-entity in life...we will be criticized and sometimes unjustly. So, let’s expect it and thereby prepare ourselves for it. A third factor in adjusting to criticism is a recognition that --

Sometimes Criticism Is a Mark of Distinction.

Therefore, we ought to rejoice in being criticized for certain things. We live in a day when conformity has become a god. We castigate the individual who is different from the crowd. But

God forbid that any of us should ever become so gray in our morality that we are acceptable to everyone. That's no virtue! In fact, Jesus advised His disciples to

“beware when all men speak well of thee” (Luke 6:26).

To maintain your moral standards in a day when social pressures are terrific and so many of your friends do obeisance before the Altar Of Conformity will not be easy. You will be criticized often. You will be laughed at much. If you persist in sticking by your convictions, you'll be ostracized by the godless gang and the Christless clique. But thank God for that kind of criticism for Jesus said,

“Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and say all manners of evil against you for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets before you” (Matt. 5:10-12).

When you are ridiculed for sticking by your moral and social guns you are moving in good company.

Abraham Lincoln was called a gorilla and much worse by his enemies. But he refused to compromise on principle.

George Washington was accused of being a crooked politician who wanted to be king. But he stood true to that which he believed.

St. Paul was constantly in and out of prison, beset by a running fire of criticism and opposition which would have broken the spirit of a lesser man. He was even called insane because of his beliefs, but he held fast to the Truth as he found it in Jesus Christ.

John Wesley and D. L. Moody were castigated on both sides of the Atlantic, but they continued their work.

Even Billy Graham has been criticized for the fervor with which he proclaims his convictions, and still he carries on.

But the classic example of all is our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He was ridiculed, double-crossed, and finally crucified by his critics. But He won! Remember that. He won! As did Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, St. Paul, John Wesley, D. L. Moody and all the others who were unashamed of their convictions and their faith. While their antagonists and critics are lost in the abyss of man's forgetfulness, these heroes of conviction live on in the Highest Hall of Honor: our memory.

Be thankful, therefore, when you are criticized for your ideals. That is the highest mark of distinction you can know.

Having said that much about handling criticism which is directed at us, let's look at the other side of the question --

What Makes Us Critical of Others?

While it is true that all of us are criticized *by* others from time to time, it is also true that all of us are critical *of* others from time to time. Of course, we call it by kindlier names. We "evaluate." Or "appraise." Or "straighten people out." But honestly now, isn't it the same kind of criticism we resent in others?

Jesus condemned this. He said, "Judge not lest ye be judged." Then He went on to make it clear that each of us will be judged with the same sort of compassion, or lack of compassion, we have shown towards others. Well, what is it that makes us critical? What causes us to sit in judgement on others?

A Sense of Inferiority.

Psychologists tell us it springs from a sense of inner frustration, inferiority or jealousy. As someone has put it,

"Criticism enables the little person to feel bigger for the moment.

He is better than the poor blunderer whose faults he enumerates.

‘At least’, he is saying to himself, ‘I’m not *that* bad.’”

So when you meet a super critic—someone who is continually slashing other people to bits with the rapier of his tongue --return his darts of hatefulness with the healing balm of understanding and sympathy. You are looking at someone who, down deep inside, is a miserable person. Psychologists also tell us criticism is sometimes born of --

A Sense of Guilt.

Jung, the famous psychiatrist, writes,

“When we do not dare acknowledge some great sin, we deplore a small sin with greater emphasis.”

In other words, by pointing out the defects in others, we are subconsciously seeking to cover up our own failings. What we are really saying is,

“See, I’m not so bad when compared with *that* person”.

Right now I’m thinking of a man who lives in a little town in Southern California. For a number of years he kept the church to which he belonged in constant turmoil. He was critical of everyone from the minister to the janitor. And he was especially cutting in his remarks of those who did not fit into his narrow concept of Christianity. He was the choir director, which made matters worse, for it put him in a place of great influence.

One day during our Crusade there, the Pastor unburdened his heart to me about the problems this man had created for him. Then he said,

“John, if he doesn’t change real soon, or leave, I’m going to leave, for he is undermining everything I try to do.”

Well, I decided to try to get next to this fellow and find out what was bothering him. I arranged to have him as my partner on one of the evenings we went calling.

After the visitation I asked him to join me for a milk shake at the local Drive-In. While we were

sitting in the car he began a caustic, critical attack on other people in the church. So, calling him by name, I said, "What's eating you anyway?" He looked surprised and said, "What do you mean?" I answered, "It's pretty obvious you have a terrific sense of guilt and are covering up for something. What is it?"

Well, of course, he was indignant. But I kept pressing the point. Suddenly he fell apart like a house of cards, and confessed that while he was a married man with a fine family, he had been cavorting about with one of the women in his choir. You see, his critical nature was simply an outward expression of his own guilt.

Now a sense of guilt is not necessarily due to an infraction of one of God's moral laws. It might be due to the knowledge that you have refused to surrender your whole life to Christ. It might be due to the fact that you have rejected what you know to be God's will for your life. It might be due to the fact that you have willfully disobeyed God in one of His clear-cut commands such as tithing. It might be any one of a dozen things. But the fact remains that one thing which makes people critical is a sense of guilt.

When Napoleon met his great and final defeat, he was a big enough man to admit his main problem was himself. He said:

"No one but myself can be blamed for my fall. I have been my own greatest enemy, the cause of my own disastrous fate."

If we are going to develop The Fine Art of Being Critical, we must also have the moral courage to make the same admission. Which is to say --

We Must Direct Our Criticism Toward The Proper Object: Ourselves.

I read a newspaper article the other day by a fine Christian layman, Roy L. Smith. It was entitled: Some Take It With Them. In it he told about a family whose name was Pesce. They lived in San Pedro, California, and had been having trouble with their car. Father Pesce was convinced son Richard had been careless about cleaning it up because the upholstery was badly damaged.

Mother Pesce was equally certain her husband had failed to buy the groceries she ordered because they were not to be found in the back of the car, although he insisted he had made the purchases.

Then the car was taken to be washed and the secret—and a little more—was out. Two baby skunks were found on the back seat! No one knows how long they had made the car their home, but one thing is sure, no one will forget very soon! Mr. Smith goes on to observe that quite unawares, the Pesce's had been going about town carrying their own skunks with them! Instead of really trying to find the source of their trouble, they had taken the easy way out. They blamed each other for their problems.

Perhaps we have been going about with some “little stinkers” of our own.

An evil spirit.

An insensitive nature.

A suspicious mind.

Or an acid tongue.

All of which have raised havoc in the lives of other people, as well as our own. Like the Pesces, we have blamed everyone for our woes except the one who is to be blamed.

Before we start castigating others for our disasters, we better inspect our own back seat. We better shoot the arrows of our criticism at our own inflated ego. We better “fess up” to the fact that we ourselves are our greatest problem and the source of our greatest difficulties. Let’s make sure our own house is in order before we start straightening out the other fellow. For as the old negro spiritual says:

“It ain’t my brother, nor my sister
But it’s me, Oh Lord.
Standin’ in the need of prayer.”

Dr. Cecil Osborne comes at this idea with characteristic directness:

“Don’t confess the sins of other people, confess your own. That

will keep most of us busy most of the time. We don't stand much of a chance of setting the world right, but we can succeed in setting our own lives right. If you can be victorious in that, it is no small attainment, and heaven will sounds its praises for the one who wins the victory."

And then this final thought --

The Solving Word for All Our Problem Cases Is: Love.

What shall we do about people with whom we just don't get along? The folks who are easy to criticize because they're not easy to like? Well, the other side of Jesus' teaching to "judge not" is found in our text:

"Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you..."

How does it work out? Let me show you. Someone has told the story of a pastor who, before a series of special services, asked the members of his church to agree to pray for a half-hour a day for a week. One man with a rather sensitive spirit agreed to do so though he had never prayed that long at one time before.

The first day he was all prayed out at the end of four minutes. He continued though and went on from his own needs to those of his friends and neighbors and finally managed to use up half an hour.

The next day, desperately seeking something to pray about, he mentally went down the street and prayed for his neighbors, skipping one man with whom he quarreled. The third day he paused briefly as he came to the quarrelsome neighbor and said,

"Lord, help that troublesome old man to be more agreeable.
Change his spirit."

On the fourth day, when he finally came to his disagreeable neighbor, he prayed for him a little more at length. The fifth day he added,

“Lord, it’s barely possible I might have been a trifle hasty in my argument with old man Smith. Forgive any slight disposition on my part to be critical and sensitive.”

The sixth day he felt moved to say,

“Lord, I may have been a little more at fault in that argument than I once thought.”

On the last day he did not begin with himself or his family, but with his neighbor:

“Lord, I was at least as equally disagreeable as Mr. Smith. I ought to help set this thing straight. Show me what to do.”

Then he arose from his knees and with determination walked across the street. Disagreeable old Smith was out mowing the lawn. He walked up to him with hand out-stretched and with a smile on his face.

“Neighbor, I’ve come to apologize for my part in that silly argument we had. Let’s be friends.”

Smith grinned sheepishly and said,

“I’ve been wishing I had the courage to say just that. Here’s my hand. We *will* be friends.”

A feud which had threatened to destroy the better part of two men evaporated in a moment. How did it happen? Quite simply: It was the result of obeying Jesus’ admonition:

“Love your enemies... bless them...pray for them...do good to them.”

As someone has said:

“We may be right of our criticism of other people’s weaknesses, but we are not commanded to be right. We are commanded to love!”

Let me repeat that:

“We may be right of our criticism of other people’s weaknesses, but
we are not commanded to be right. We are commanded to love!”

Jesus said:

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and mind and
soul and thy neighbor as thyself.”

What then shall we do to develop The Fine Art of Being Critical? Well --

Let’s brighten the light of our own self-criticism.

Let’s carefully analyze our motives when we are prompted to set someone else right, when we are tempted to jab a brother with the rapier of our tongue.

Let’s surrender our pride and humbly ask God to forgive our secret sins so we are free from any sense of guilt which might make us critical.

Let’s also surrender our sensitive spirit and ask God to toughen our skin so we won’t be getting our feelings hurt all the time. Finally --

Let’s ask Him to use us—not in an “advisory capacity”—but as a witness. A witness whose radiant face, joy filled life, and happy conversation will create an atmosphere in which Christ-likeness will grow, and those outside the church, who stand and watch, will be obliged to say:

“Behold, how they love one another.”