



Week of August 21, 2011

Don't Criticize One Another



Background

Passages

Romans 14:1-23;

James 4:1-12

to seek ways to build up one another and promote harmony in the church.

God's Word instructs believers to build up one another and to promote harmony in the church.

Focal Verses

Romans 14:1-12,19;

James 4:11-12

Why This Lesson Is Important

Some church members are quick to gossip, find fault with each other, and put one another down. This is inappropriate behavior for Christians. Instead,

How This Lesson Can Impact Your Life

This lesson can help you evaluate your attitudes and speech about other people and to relate to them in ways that are constructive rather than destructive.

What This Lesson Is About

This lesson is about the need for believers to refrain from judgmental criticism of one another and instead

Early in my first pastorate, I learned a church member was criticizing me for favoring “college people” over “town people.” I was perplexed, because I sincerely was trying to minister to the whole congregation. The chairman of deacons—a “town person”—assured me the criticism was unfounded and was simply one disgruntled person’s gripe. The chairman’s support helped me move past criticism that could have been very unsettling. This lesson will help believers relate to one another in constructive rather than destructive ways.

➔ *What emotions do you feel when someone unfairly criticizes you? How should these feelings encourage you to refrain from criticizing others?*

The Problem with Criticism

James 4:11-12

¹¹Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge.

¹²There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another?

In James 4:11-12, James either was exhorting believers to stop criticizing one another or not to develop the habit of doing so in the first place. Perhaps he was doing both; the Greek wording allows for either or both. With his words, James clearly prohibited Christians from speaking **evil...of** (slandering, defaming) **one... another**. The Greek term carries the idea of backbiting, of speaking harshly about others in their absence. To speak against other believers was to render harsh judgment against them—to assume the role only God is qualified to fill.

To slander and condemn another person also was to speak **evil of the law** and to **judge** it harshly. The phrase *the law* likely refers to the “royal law” James quoted in 2:8: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Acting against this law was essentially to deem it

to be a bad law that ought to be removed. If James had in mind God's law in general, he meant believers who criticized and judged others broke the royal law, thus breaking the whole law and arrogantly claiming superiority to the law. Either way, critics set themselves up as judges of the law and claimed to be wiser than God.

James stressed that only **one**—God—is qualified to be **lawgiver**. He alone has power to **save and to destroy**. James reflected the Old Testament emphasis that issues of life and death belong to God (see Ps. 68:20).

Rhetorically, James asked: "But you, who are you the one judging the brother?" This is what the latter portion of verse 12 literally means. No one was or is qualified to assume God's prerogative of making official judgments.

Believers are to avoid harshly criticizing other Christians. This includes a responsibility to avoid gossiping, which is a sin. We are never to spread gossip, even in the guise of prayer requests.

 *Why is gossiping a sin against others and, ultimately, a sin against God?*

We must give the right to judge others back to God; judging is not our prerogative. If you have engaged in faultfinding and sometimes have an unkind, critical attitude toward others, ask God to forgive you. You may need to ask certain people to forgive you as well. Seek God's wisdom on this matter and do whatever you need to do to restore ruptured relationships.

The Need for Acceptance

Romans 14:1-4

¹Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.

²For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs.

³Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him.

Discover Deeper Meaning

Speak...evil in James 4:11 is literally “speak against” (from the Greek verb *katalaleo*). The same term appears in 1 Peter 3:16. The noun form of the word is translated *backbiters* (Rom. 1:30), *backbitings* (2 Cor. 12:20), and *evil speakings* (1 Pet. 2:1). A profound difference exists between the criticism about which James wrote and *epanorthosis*, correction that equips for greater service (see 2 Tim. 3:16-17). The criticism of James 4:11 is not constructive; rather, it is harsh, unkind, and judgmental.

“Who art thou that judgest another man’s servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be held up: for God is able to make him stand.

Paul urged believers in Rome to **receive** the person who was **weak in the faith**. The word *receive* means “welcome into fellowship.” The *weak* were believers whose *faith* was immature or uninstructed; they did not understand that their liberty in Christ freed them from legalistic restrictions. Mature believers who exercised their freedom from ritualistic religion were not to argue with Christians who had sensitive consciences regarding **disputations** Paul termed **doubtful**, such as dietary restrictions. Believers who ate **all things**—perhaps such as meat originally offered to idols—were not to **despise** (treat with contempt or reject as nothing) vegetarians, who may have had concerns about eating meat or who may have chosen to keep Jewish dietary laws. In turn, vegetarians were not to **judge** (criticize harshly, censure) meat-eaters. Paul later addressed the *doubtful disputations* of observing “one day above another” (Romans 14:5) and drinking wine (see v. 21).

He stressed as well that **God hath received** (welcomed into fellowship) strong believers because of their faith in Christ, even as He had welcomed weaker Christians. When *all* of them came to Christ, they were born into God’s kingdom as spiritual infants anyway—and God’s accepting them as repentant sinners stresses

the same point as His accepting them whether they were weak or strong in their faith. Thus, believers also should be accepting.

♥ *What happens in a believer's mind and heart when he or she is accepted by a community of believers—despite his or her shortcomings?*

Even as a **servant** (household slave) answered only to **his own master**, Christians answered only to their Master (Christ or God). Thus immature believers had no grounds to censure more mature believers, for judgment belongs to God alone. Nor did mature believers have a right to criticize their weaker counterparts. The Christian servant **standeth or falleth** according to God's evaluation; human opinions have no bearing whatsoever on our standing with God. Each believer has sure footing with God—he **shall be held up**—because **God is able to make him stand**.

🌀 *In what ways are you challenged by God's evaluation of you? In what ways are you encouraged?*

Christians must love, respect, and accept one another even when they disagree. Even if some believers are spiritually strong so that certain circumstances do not trouble them, they need to be sensitive to and patient with immature Christians who still have problems and questions. This is God's way.

The Goal of Edification

Romans 14:5-12,19

⁵One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.

⁶He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.

⁷For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself.

⁸For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's.

⁹For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living.

¹⁰But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

¹¹For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.

¹²So then everyone of us shall give account of himself to God.

.....
¹⁹Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.

Some believers considered **one day above** or more sacred than **another**. Paul likely was referring to ceremonial days on the Jewish religious calendar, including the Sabbath. Immature believers insisted on observing these days while more mature believers viewed **every day alike**—as another day to serve God. Paul admonished believers to act according to their consciences, to **be fully persuaded in their own minds**; that is, to make decisions based on honest convictions. He allowed room for disagreement on nonessential matters but warned against letting such differences fracture fellowship. A critical spirit threatens church harmony.

 *How can believers agree to disagree without being disagreeable?*

Paul pointed out that although believers might differ on certain points of conviction, they all had the same motive: to honor **the Lord**. They all sought to worship, honor, and please **God**, and they all gave Him **thanks** for providing their food. Purity of motive bound them together as they attempted to do their Master's will.

No Laughing Matter

A number of years ago, Flip Wilson popularized a phrase that became a standard introduction for skits on the wildly popular program *Rowan and Martin's Laugh In*—"Here come de judge!" The courtroom scenes that followed each announcement were hilarious. When believers judge one another critically, however, it is no laughing matter. No surprise then, that neither will God's just judgment on His people's critical spirits be funny.

How do the following verses underscore that God's judgment of critical spirits will be a very serious affair?

1 Samuel 2:2-3; Psalm 94:1-2; Psalm 96:13; Matthew 12:36-37



How does church harmony promote the gospel?

Verse 7 often is taken to mean that believers cannot live isolated lives; each person is related to and has responsibility for others. Although that is a valid inference, Paul really meant that believers eternally **are the Lord's**, something he stated more clearly in verse 8. Christians live out their lives under Christ's lordship, and they continue under His lordship after physical death. To **live or die unto the Lord** is to do so in His sight, answerable to Him. May we live continually with this awareness.

Paul stressed that the purpose of Christ's death and resurrection was that He might exercise lordship over all people of faith. Thus, He is Lord over **living** believers and over Christians who have died. His lordship over believers is all-inclusive and eternal.

In light of Jesus' absolute authority over believers, it is both presumptuous and wrong for Christians to judge one another. Using the same Greek term he employed for *despise* in verse 3, Paul asked the reason Christians censured and expressed contempt for one another: **Why dost thou set at nought thy brother?** After all, every believer **shall...stand before** Christ's **judgment seat**. Only He is qualified to judge. Critics ultimately will answer to Him.

Paul quoted from Isaiah 45:23 to stress God's sovereignty in judgment. The word **every** emphasizes the inclusiveness of God's final judgment and the universality of people's ultimately bowing to Him in confession and praise. Metaphorically, each believer will open up life's ledger (**give account of himself**) to God. How, then, can we criticize one another? In God's presence, we will go over *our own* ledgers, not others' account books.

Instead of engaging in criticism, believers doggedly are to endeavor **to follow after the things which make for peace**—not only the absence of conflict but all that contributes to spiritual wholeness for the church and for individual members. Everything we say and do should **edify one another**—promote the spiritual growth or advancement of other believers. We must be busy working to build up others instead of tearing them down. The truth is that straightening out our own lives rather than trying to straighten out others will keep us busy enough.

➔ *What are some ways we can edify other believers?*

As Christians, we must choose our battles wisely. We must learn to distinguish between issues that are worth fighting for and those that aren't. Remember: Don't criticize; instead, edify!

The Life Word

More often than not, I think, Christians disguise personal judgments of others under the rather transparent mask of "a prayer request" or "constructive criticism." Judgmental criticism hurts the people to whom it is directed—and it rends the fabric of a church's fellowship. Refrain from such criticism. Instead, seek ways to build up one another and promote harmony in the church.

The admonitions of James and Paul highlighted in this week's lesson can help us avoid a critical spirit. Doing so, we can more readily contribute to others' spiritual growth, and in the process we also will strengthen the church's fellowship.