

Criticism in Church!

This is something that many of us struggle with all our lives. There's a fine line between having an opinion or confronting something that is wrong – and criticising, judging, knocking other Christians down.

What is it? What is wrong and how do we get our heads round it? Here are some answers. If you have more ideas, write them down or discuss them after the talk.

Intro

One of the areas that God has been dealing with me in recently, is the area of criticism and the power of the tongue. It's so easy to slip into a mode of criticism, just to get things off your chest or to undermine others or simply because you don't think carefully enough. The power of the tongue and of criticism is something that is endemic in human nature, but God has given us power over the tongue and we need to use that control. So I've had to do my own repenting for the things I've said, the way I've criticised and unfairly judged others. I've had to ask God for forgiveness and say sorry. Maybe you need to as well!

Christian criticism hurts God and wrecks our witness to the world

One of the areas that grieves me and far more the Holy Spirit – is in the area of Christians slagging off other people's ministries. I cannot over-emphasise that we must never or must stop doing this today. Criticism is not from God – it is from the devil who loves to see Christians fight and be in dis-unity. The evil one must often watch on with delight as Christians fight. The Bible describes the Holy Spirit in some places as being like a dove (John 1.32 for example) and we need the Holy Spirit with us. We know from the Bible that we can grieve the Holy Spirit by what we do and say. Now, the dove is a sensitive bird and he will fly away if things get rowdy. When we criticise and disrespect others, the dove of the Holy Spirit flies away.

The internet is perhaps the most judgmental place on the planet, as people can't see others and can easily write comments that destroy and tear down people and ministries. Just type in the names of almost any large Christian ministry (especially in the US) and you're confronted with judgment after judgment and loads of bitterness, misrepresentation and hypocrisy! God has called us to love each other and doesn't need our totally flawed advice or help in dealing with people!!

I was recently reading a page committed to bashing the ministry of a man of God who I've learned much from and heard many times in person. I can't tell you how painful that is to God. The comments made against the minister are highly likely to be without basis. This is someone trusted by major organisations in the UK and US, who has written many great books and spoken at many conferences. Yet most of the comments on a certain blog site are dedicated to bringing the person's name into disrepute.

Example of criticism – the ‘Florida Outpouring’

In 2008 there was an event over many nights called the ‘Florida Outpouring’ from a place called Lakeland in Florida. It was covered live by GOD TV as many believed God was pouring out his Spirit in revival, with heaven touching earth and people being miraculously healed, delivered, set free and transformed. The national medias and newspapers covered it, from the US to the UK and beyond. Many Christians went to Lakeland and really believed God touched them. They went back to their nations carrying the fire they felt God had given them. Christian forums were buzzing. Magazine and blogs went up with all kinds of divided opinions. Even within the charismatic movement, people disagreed and had differences of views. YouTube and other websites were loaded with clips for and against what was happening or those involved personally. Much of the talk was over the top and even nasty. The revival ended fairly suddenly after it was found the man leading it had a near affair with one of his staff. It was a real tragedy, but if those people quick to judge had prayed for the man instead, maybe things could have been so different...

No matter what you think (and I’ve heard all the extremes), the criticism was fierce and often highly judgmental. Why do we find it so necessary to knock people down? The more visible people are, it seems the more people are prepared to have their 2 cents and criticise. It is right for us to have an opinion, to think and to bring correction to those in our sphere. But to tear down and destroy? The Bible tells us in John 10.10 that’s what the devil does. If you are dissing people, slagging them off or criticising them – you are doing the devil’s work. It’s time to stop, say sorry to God and change.

Judge Yourself not others! Matthew 7.1-5

“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

At times, the church seems so intent on knocking each other down, judging and criticising that the world must look on and wonder.. And the heart of Jesus must break at times... Listen, what helps one person doesn’t help another. We need to have a varied church and Christian ministries. We need this variation in the church as we’re all different and are into different things. The people around you relate to different music, interests and ways of doing things. If we are to connect with different people, we need to do different things. The church must be an interesting creative place, not a place full of clones or robots... If you don’t something or someone in Christian ministry on your TV, digital radio, turn it off! If you don’t like the conference, don’t go! But thank God that others will benefit and go find your place and live life out there, judging yourself and not others.

Don't judge unless you want to be judged yourself

Hypocrisy is rife as people claim they are 'judging' false prophets. They throw around Bible verses in an apparent show of righteousness. Verses like Acts 20.28-30 where Paul warns of watching over the 'flock' and about savage wolves coming in to churches to deceive. 2 Peter 2 is another chapter of the Bible these people love to quote from. Yet their interpretation of the Bible they so willingly use is as flawed as their reaction to people they perceive as false prophets. People are called to judge others, but first and foremost we are to judge ourselves. I am a sinner that needs God's grace, I should dedicate my life to working with God to sort myself out, not others! Secondly, verses like the ones quoted above clearly show 2 things. Firstly, the Bible talks about judgment being reserved for overseers of their own flock. There is nothing about judging others outside of the church you're responsible for. Secondly, God promises to deal with these people. We are to be wise and stop genuine false prophets and act wisely in discipline. But God has appointed Jesus to judge, not you and me! Thank goodness!!

The adulterous woman – John 8.1-11

But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

This is an amazing story. Jesus forgave this woman while others wanted to stone her to death. Jesus told the huddled masses that if anyone hadn't sinned then they could throw the first stone. As they nervously looked at each other, Jesus started to draw something in the sand. No-one knows what Jesus was doing. Maybe he was listing the woman's sins and then crossing them out. Or maybe he was listing some of the sins of some of the Pharisees and people so ready to accuse the woman.

Imagine if Jesus was crouching down beside you while you were on the beach, writing with his finger in the sand, listing all your sins. One by one, he wrote things you thought no-one else knew about, would never want anyone to know... The most terrible things you had done and hadn't done, the things you'd said and even thought. One by one, Jesus revealed them. If this is what Jesus did, no wonder the crowd walked away quickly.

When we criticise it says something about the bad state of our heart

You see, when we criticise and disrespect other people, it says everything about us and nothing about those we are criticising. If you speak against others, it shows what is in your heart. The Bible tells us that out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. Whatever is in you will come out from you. So if you disrespect others, there is an issue that needs to be dealt with in you. This is what God has shown me and a lesson I have learned the hard way.

Before you open your mouth, stop, think and pray. James tells us that we can't have a mouth that speaks blessings one minute and curses the next. He warns us the tongue is like a rudder on a ship that can cause a ship to shipwreck. People's lives are torn apart by words. Death and life are in the power of the tongue. So ask God to guard your tongue today and every day and speak life to people, not death.

What does God say?

Firstly, are we all being faithful to God's call on our lives? A brief look on the internet reveals many sites dedicated to beating down other Christians. Rather than building the Kingdom of God, so many of us (I include me) spend time destroying it because people do things that we don't relate to, don't like or don't understand. Who made us all judge and jury?! Certainly not God, as the Bible says that he has given Jesus the task of judging (see Rom 2.16, 2 Tim 4.1). What are we each doing for Jesus? Are we seeing lives changed, people healed and impacted?! So many who are quick to judge could be doing so much more for God personally, rather than trying to replace the Holy Spirit and seeing their mission as bringing truth to the church. The Spirit alone does this, and he convicts people's hearts rather than labelling people 'guilty' like so many people do on the web and beyond.

Second, the Bible has a lot to say about loving one another. First and foremost, Jesus prayed that his disciples (including us) would love each other so the world would see the Kingdom of God. John 13.34-35, *"Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* In John 15.12, Jesus told his disciples to love each other as Jesus loved them! What a high standard! Romans 14 repeatedly tells us that there is one faith, manifested in different ways. Paul tells us to accept each other, not look down on each other, to live our faith according to our conscience, stop passing judgement on others and stop putting obstacles in each other's way.

Yes, we are commanded to speak the truth in love, to lead a brother back towards the truth. We know that in these end times, some people don't always listen to sound doctrine and we have a duty to speak the truth. But I see too many of the church speaking out against others in the church – keen to talk about what 'others' do that we don't like, don't do, don't stand for, don't accept. Maybe we all need to recognise our own sinful selves and deal with / crucify that first and foremost! We need to be telling the world what we do stand for and that Jesus is alive, is the truth, the way and the life – building one another up in love in the church. We need to be a true body (a bride being made ready by Christ) and working together like the picture of the body in 1 Corinthians 12.

Challenge

Prayer (just pause before you pray and stand before God in silence) – *Lord, I'm sorry that I have been critical and had a critical negative spirit. I confess (list anything God brings to mind). I am sorry and turn away from this, knowing that this hurts you. Please forgive me and change me. Please put a guard over my tongue to stop me saying wrong things like it says in Psalm 141 verse 3. Instead, create a pure heart in me (Psalm 51) and change my heart so I see others like you see them. I want to build up the Kingdom of God and not knock it down. Help me find my place serving you and use me to change other people's lives with the power of your Holy Spirit. Thank you Jesus. Amen.*

My challenge to me and to the church is this: is what we are doing, saying, thinking, the way we are living – bringing glory to God and attracting people to Jesus, or putting them off?! Let us ask God to give us wisdom, discernment, to love him and each other, to love his Word and to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit. Let us do what God has called us to do, walk our path and stay on track. Let us be quick to love and slow to judge (unless to those we are shepherding as there is a right kind of judgement) – as the Lord alone will judge. But let us reflect our God – let us be kind, merciful, compassionate, loving and slow to anger. And let us pray for one another, releasing the greatest source of power in the universe – and ask God for forgiveness. Jesus said that 'by their fruits you shall know them'. The proof is in the pudding.. Or in the fruit. Let's ask God for more fruit, in our lives and through others.