



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THIS MATTER OF JUDGMENT”

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 7:1-5

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, January 18, 2009.

She stopped by my office recently with a quick request --- that I address the subject of criticism sometime in a sermon. She admitted that she has a problem with it but didn't really say whether the problem was in the giving of criticism or the receiving of it. At any rate she was looking for some guidance, some insight, some biblical perspective on criticism. So here, for what its worth, is my attempt to respond to her request. I want you to know that we preachers are flattered and appreciative when people make requests for sermons on particular issues. The last thing we want to do is to answer questions nobody is really asking.

Today seemed an appropriate time to speak to this topic because next week in our study of the Sermon on the Mount our Men's Bible Study Group will come to a passage where Jesus touches on the topic of criticism, though he calls it judging. Any look at criticism from a Christian perspective, especially criticism given of another, would have to include a consideration of these words of our Lord. (Read Matthew 7:1-5)

Have you ever struggled with knowing how to give constructive criticism of another person? I am sure you have, unless of course you are some kind of unfeeling, insensitive person who doesn't really care how you might offend another or else one who is uninterested in seeing others change or improve. Surely we all have had our struggles in this area and I include myself in that number.

Someone may well be thinking, “Well, I don't think one should ever be critical of another person. Live and let live is my philosophy. It should be nobody's business how another believes or behaves. After all, didn't Jesus say, ‘Judge not lest ye be judged’?” But such a position is ethical nonsense is it not? It is either naïve or irresponsible or both.

In point of fact, none of us can escape offering criticism of another unless we live in a moral vacuum or in complete isolation, or unless we deem our world and our associates to be completely perfect and thoroughly sanctified. But barring either of those unlikely scenarios we are all critics to one extent or another, whether we like it or not, and whether we are conscious of it or not. The odds are that most of us do not live with perfect spouses, nor do we rear perfect children, nor do we live with perfect parents. As a result we cannot avoid criticism in the home.

What is more, criticism is constantly expected of us if we have to supervise and evaluate other people at work or in our secular associations. We must of necessity offer constructive criticism and suggestions for growth or improvement.

In addition, if we are responsible members of our church, of organizations and associations in the community, we cannot escape having and voicing critical insights. In fact, if we ever have to decide what we will eat, what we wear, what we will believe, what we will read, where we will live -- - than our critical faculties have to come into play. So the real issue is not whether we will offer

criticism but rather what kind of criticism will we offer. Will our criticism be appropriate or inappropriate, harsh or gentle, reasonable or thoughtless, loving or self-serving? And what is more, will our criticism be effective or ineffective?

Some people believe that when Jesus said that we should judge not lest we be judge that he was saying that any kind of judgment or criticism of another is forbidden. But this is one of those many sayings of Jesus which is often misunderstood or taken out of context. Leo Tolstoy even argued on the basis of this text that Christ would be opposed to any human institution, even a court of law, which exercised judgment upon another.

And yet our Lord's injunction to "judge not" cannot be construed to mean that we suspend our critical faculties in relation to other people, that we overlook their faults, that we tolerate their sins, that we ignore their injustices. Were we to refrain from all critical judgment than we would lose the capacity to distinguish between truth and falsehood, between good and evil, between the righteous and the wicked, between the helpful and the harmful. Jesus himself had to speak a critical word to his own mother, his disciples, people with whom he engaged, and the religious & political powers about him.

So what then is Jesus saying here? I believe that Jesus meant that we should "condemn not". We are not to write off other people in a spiritual or personal sense. We are not to consign anyone to damnation or regard any person as worthless, or beyond redemption. Salvation and damnation are God's business alone and we are presumptuous indeed to try to assume this awesome task. No human being is wise enough or good enough or righteous enough to condemn anyone. The apostle Paul well understood this and that is why he wrote to the Romans saying:

"Why do you pass judgment on you brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another." (Romans 14:10, 13)

But if we should not condemn another person outright, neither should we be censorious, cruel or unloving in our critical assessments. And this, I believe, is what Jesus is really getting at in his message on judgment in the Sermon on the Mount. While the Christian disciple can and must be a critic, but his criticism must be of a controlled and compassionate nature. We are not to be censorious critics who judge others harshly or with malice intended. As followers of Jesus we are not to be excessive faultfinders who exaggerate a person's flaws, put the worst possible construction on their motives, discount their worth or minimize their skills or rejoice in their failings. A censorious critic is one who looks for, expects and therefore finds the worst in others. To the contrary we are to look for the good and offer encouragement along with correction.

So how do we exercise a healthy and helpful criticism of others --- of members of our own family, of friends, of coworkers or colleagues? Here are some questions we might well ask of ourselves before we undertake the tedious and touchy task of removing splinters from the eyes of others.

To begin with, as Jesus suggests, we might want to remove or at a minimum acknowledge the log in our own eyes before we seek to correct the behavior of others. We should ask ourselves whether or not we are guilty of the very thing we are criticizing. Often that is the case. We tend to find most objectionable in others the very thing we detest within ourselves but cannot admit. So any helpful criticism must be tempered with humility. Any criticism that you offer another that comes

from a posture of superiority or arrogance will be resented and wasted. Even Socrates recognized a good principal when he said that before starting to criticize another's action one should first stop and consider how one measures up beside the other in the things being criticized.

To be sure, there maybe occasions when we have to criticize in others the very things of which we are guilty. But at a minimum humility ought to prompt us to acknowledge this along with our corrective word. We might say to a child, "Honey, I know that I am not the most patient parent in the world and I sometimes fly off the handle, but I am concerned also that you have such a short fuse here lately and that the least little thing seems to get you upset. Can we work on this together?" Or you might say to an employee whom you supervise: "Bob, I know you have been arriving late for work in recent days. I have had a problem with this myself in the past so I understand how difficult it is to make it here right on time, but lets both resolve to correct this problem and do better from here on out."

So I repeat, if you want your criticism to be heard and appreciated, then humility is essential.

Secondly, before offering criticism of another you need to ask yourself in all honesty what your true motives are. Why is it that you find this action, this practice, even this person so objectionable? It is a healthy exercise to examine your own motives when you are tempted to criticize another. For example, why are you feeling so critical of your child's basketball coach? Is it because she is a female and you are struggling with gender equality? Is it because your child doesn't get to play his or her preferred position? Is it because your best friend use to do a better job in your estimation when he was the coach last year? Is it because you value winning over personal development and your coach doesn't approach the task from the same perspective? Is it because she volunteered for the job before you had the opportunity to and you secretly resent her being the coach of your child? Is it because she doesn't ask for your assistance like the old coach did? You see, we should at least be honest with ourselves about our own motives and ask how do we stand to gain should the person we are criticizing be diminished somehow? You would be surprised how much unnecessary and unkind criticism would be eliminated if the person doing the criticizing would only examine how self-serving his or her judgment really is. So our criticism of another should be exercised not only with humility but also with selflessness.

Thirdly, before you voice your criticism you need to ask, have I really tried to empathize with the person I am criticizing? Have I tried to put myself in her shoes or sought to understand the pain or the problems that have produced what seems to be objectionable behavior? Are you willing to be merciful in your judgment and to give people the benefit of the doubt, to look behind the symptoms for the causes? To be quite honest with you, nothing is more helpful to me personally than to reflect for a moment on what may be going on in the life of the person whose behavior strikes me as inappropriate or unacceptable.

If we could only be more empathetic in our judgment and criticism of others it would pay great dividends. If we could only be as generous and as magnanimous toward others and their faults as we would hope they would be of us and ours, we would transform our relationships. If we could only do unto others as we would have them do unto us, then we would find ourselves eventually to be the beneficiaries of our own mercies and kindnesses. I say this because Jesus assured us that we ourselves will be judged by the same standard with which we judge others. The measure we give will be the measure we get, and that, my friends is a matter of eternal significance for each of us.

So how should we criticize others? With humility, with selflessness and with great empathy.

Now time will not allow us to say everything that could be said with respect to exercising criticism or judgment of others, but let me close by emphasizing the most important concern of all if we are interested in offering criticism that is helpful and constructive, if we want not just to get something off our own chest but to bring about needed correction. The primary question we need to ask before we voice our criticism is this --- is my criticism born of love or is it born of something less ---- anger, revenge, resentment, pride? Since love always desires what is in another's best interest, do I really want to help or to harm this person of whom I am so critical? If your intention is not to help but to chastise, to attack, or to punish, then keep your criticisms to yourself unless it is a matter of life or death. Love, I believe, is the primary distinction between constructive and destructive criticism, between helpful and harmful advice, between Christian and unchristian judgment of others.

You see, if you are really my friend and not my foe, if I know that you are ultimately for me and not against me, then I will welcome your criticism and seek to profit by it. You can challenge me; you can question me; you can correct me; you can tell me to take a hike, and I will probably give it due consideration if I know that you have my best interest at heart. But if I know that you are only out to get me, to hurt me, to destroy me, then even your flattery or your praise will be unwelcomed.

In closing, let me repeat that we cannot and should not lay aside our critical assessment of other people. This is how we grow and help others to grow. This is the way we seek to fashion a better world and a better life for all people. But at a minimum, let our criticism be characterized by humility, by genuine selflessness, by intentional empathy, and by the kind of love that is most clearly manifested in the person of Jesus Christ, the one we call the man for others.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.