

Happiness through Criticism

Matthew 5:11

“Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.”

It is true, unexpected critical words can often be as painful to the spirit as physical wounds are to the flesh. Once they leave the lips of a friend, co-worker, or relative, your body waste no time in reacting. Your muscles tense, your throat goes dry, and you experience a strange flutter in your heart. **With the stinging words left hanging before you, what are you to do?** Most of us find ourselves standing motionless and speechless as the verbal perpetrator walks away.

If this scenario is painfully familiar, then count yourself among the millions of recipients of harsh words each day. Though none of us seek out opportunities *to criticize* or *to be criticized*, there is bound to be *tension*, *conflict*, and *opposition* when humans interact.

For the past few weeks we have taken a long look at the Beatitudes. We have seen that happiness is a choice that begins with our decision to receive Jesus Christ as personal Savior, and is affected by our attitudes and relationships to others.

Today we come to Jesus' summation of His Magna Carta of Happiness by showing us the secular world's reaction to those who live by His principles. **What does Jesus promise will happen to us if we are:**

Peacemakers in a world at war?

Pure in heart while surrounded by corruption?

Merciful in a world without pity?

Righteous in a sin-saturated society?

Meek while everyone else looks out for number one?

In our last study we saw that our reward is persecution. Now Jesus expands on this theme, broadening it to include the far more common everyday experience of criticism. If we are going to be happy in an unhappy world, it is vital that we learn both how to respond to criticism redemptively and also how to avoid being bearers of negative criticism.

There are three ways to avoid criticism: say nothing, do nothing and be nothing. The person who is never criticized is probably not breathing.

We are all interested in criticism because we all get criticized at one time or another. Part of the reason for that is that so many of the people around us are critics.

A critic is someone who has divorced hope and married despair. When someone begins a conversation by saying, "I hope you won't mind my telling you this," you can be sure you will.

It never works to say anything good to a person infected with a critical spirit. Wish them a nice day and they snap back, "Don't tell me what kind of day to have!"

The critic has no dreams. He just *rehearses defeats*. He *never sees opportunities*, just *obstacles*. **He knows no delights, no joy and no peace.** He looks to *find fault* in other people as though it were buried treasure. He is convinced others have all the *advantages*, and he has only *disadvantages*.

Criticism is like opium or liquor: it's addictive. It produces an insatiable appetite for more of itself. The more we criticize, the more we feel driven to criticize.

Just about everyone knows there are two kinds of criticism: constructive and destructive. Generally speaking, constructive criticism is when I criticize you. Destructive criticism is when you criticize me.

Not everyone who criticizes us is demented, deranged or demonized. It just might surprise you to realize that there are times when your critics are right. The successful - and happy - person is the one who can lay a firm foundation for future success with the bricks that his critics have thrown at him!

Listen very carefully; if you are not mature enough to take criticism, you are not mature enough to handle praise! Norman Vincent Peale once said, "The trouble with most of us, is that we would rather be ruined by praise than saved by criticism."

Constructive criticism attacks the problem, not the person. Destructive criticism attacks the person and ignores the problem. Its venom is planted by a two-legged viper trying to crush another person's self-image, character or spirituality with a self-righteous vengeance.

Constructive criticism seeks to restore. Destructive criticism seeks to tear down. Remember the account recorded in John 8 of the woman caught in the act of adultery? The Pharisees wanted to kill her. But Jesus found a way to restore her. When something within us wants to hurt another person with our speech, or our actions, we can be sure it is the voice of Satan trying to use our tongues to do his destructive dirty work.

Constructive criticism is a mother patiently showing her little son how to use his knife and fork: "Honey, let me show you how to cut your meat the right way." She is attacking the problem, not the person. Destructive criticism sounds more like this: "You eat like a pig! You're just like your father." The person has been attacked, the problem ignored!

Constructive criticism says, "I may not like what you do, but I love you." **Destructive criticism is designed from the outset to hurt, to create self-doubt, to foster suspicion.** It is one of Satan's favorite weapons for destroying friendships, marriages and churches.

Too many Christians have mastered the heinous art of slandering one another under the banner of sharing. The ministry of slanderous sharing often begins when unspiritual and ungodly so-called "prayer group's" gather in the name of Jesus and start talking:

"I drove past Bill's house last night," reports Deacon Blab. "It's up for sale."

"Oh, really?" croons Suzie Tellmemore.

"Yes," sighs Blab. "He and his wife have separated. Another woman is involved, I hear." **By now the sharks are circling, smelling blood in the water.**

"Wasn't his son arrested the other night in the drug bust up at the high school?" probes brother Gab.

"You know, I just knew Bill was being too lenient with that boy," says Blab, "He was bound to come to no good."

"Bill really needs our prayers," someone drones as they reach for more coffee and move on to the next victim.

The truth is, Bill and his son have been slandered by fellow believers under the self-righteous umbrella of sharing. This kind of conduct is shameful. Jesus warns us in Matthew 12:36-37 that "men will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every careless

word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."

The truth-of-the-matter is that we often try to justify our ungodly gossip by saying, "What I am sharing is not gossip, it is true." **Ladies and gentlemen, there are times when an unpleasant truth simply does not have to be told. Here are four common-sense questions to ask in handling these difficult situations:**

Is what I am about to say absolutely true.

Is it absolutely necessary to tell it, to this audience, at this time, under these circumstances?

It is fair to all concerned?

Is my motive in telling it pure?

How do we keep from becoming a source of destructive criticism? This requires that we look at what Scripture has to say about our speech.

The tongue is a boneless monster that hides behind a wall of enamel waiting to lash out at its victim. It weighs less than six ounces, but it can crush and kill.

The Word of God paints a vivid portrait of the uncontrolled tongue in James 3: 5-8, "The tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison."

From time to time we watch on television as massive forest fires rage out of control, firefighters helpless to stop the devastation.

Homes, businesses, schools, churches and millions of dollars in timber are lost.

So it is with the tongue. It is Satan's tool for destroying homes, marriages, friendships and churches.

The tongue can defile the body of Christ. Show me a divided church, and often as not I will show you the fruit of unbridled tongues. The tongue is "set on fire by hell." **The Bible tells us there are two sources of fire for the tongue.** Acts 2 tells us it can be set ablaze with the fire of the Holy Spirit, and James 3 tells us it can be set on fire by hell. The choice is ours.

Words! They are as common as blooms on spring flowers. Yet how mighty their power and how irrevocable their influence!

Words are the transcript of the mind. A man's words are an index of his character. Jesus said in Matthew 12:34, "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks."

Solomon wrote in Proverbs 18:21, "The tongue has the power of life and death." **In other words, if we use our tongue properly, it brings life.** If our tongue is unbridled, it can deal out death.

In Matthew 7:1-2 Jesus has given us this very grave warning, "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you shall be judged; and with what measure you measure, it shall be measured to you again." Listen friend, if your speech is filled with *criticism*, *bitterness*, *faultfinding* and *resentment*, your future is apt to be flooded with the same!