

A FOOLISH HABIT

You've heard the old saying - "Everybody's a critic." It seems especially true of us Americans. We have art critics, drama critics, music critics, literature critics, critics of government, critics of business, critics of labor and the list goes on. Some might even say that we have an obsession with pointing out the weaknesses and faults of others. In my thinking, the sad thing about our behavior is that we are convinced that it is the right thing to do; that it will somehow spur that other person on to excellence.

Unfortunately, this mind-set gets carried over into our earthly and spiritual families as well. Not only do we use criticism to attempt to reshape our mates and children, we are also prone to wield this tool on other Christians who don't measure up to our expectations. Our spiritual leaders, in particular, often find themselves the victims of our withering hail of verbal arrows. Because they are highly visible and accessible targets, they are far more likely to bear the wounds inflicted by criticism. Yet, in spite of the pain that our words cause, we keep telling ourselves it is the right thing to do. It will cause that person to make needed improvements in his life.

We don't get to far in justifying this mentality, however, when we consider the words of the Lord Jesus on the subject (Mt. 7:1-5). He says it all in just three short words- "Do not judge." What does He mean? The word 'judge' has the idea of distinguishing or disclosing. A judge observes the evidence, evaluates it, and then comes to a certain conclusion. It might mean approval, commendation or exoneration. Even a negative judgement is necessary at times. In this very text, however, Jesus indicates that the person whose life is pure can help take the speck out of his brother's eye (Mt. 7:5). That is a form of judgement. And, in the next verse (vs.6), He says, "do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces." In order to obey that verse, we obviously must make a judgement as to who the dogs and hogs are! Later Jesus said, "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment" (John 7:24). Is Christ contradicting Himself? Obviously not. What, then, does He mean?

When the Lord Jesus says, "Do not judge," He is warning us about a faultfinding spirit, a critical attitude that prompts us to pick at others for the things we do not like in them, to accuse them, blame them and complain to them when they do not live up to our expectations. The one word that sums it up is criticism.

Why do we do it? Probably the most common reason is selfishness. What other people do sometimes inconveniences us, costs us time and money, runs counter to our preferences or disagrees with our way of doing things. We want things to run smoothly and be pleasant and agreeable for us, and when they don't, we find fault with that person. A second reason has to do with our own insecurity or inferiority. It surfaces in the form of pride. Attacking someone else gives us a feeling of superiority. It makes us feel a little smarter or better than they are.

The Work of God makes it very clear that criticism is a foolish habit for a number of reasons. For one thing, our knowledge is only partial. We don't know

all of the facts. Only God knows all the facts and can make an accurate evaluation. He alone has the right to play God. Secondly, our judgement is fallible. Even if we knew all the facts, our sinful biases would prevent us from interpreting them correctly. Thirdly, we are not responsible for the actions of other people. We are not their masters. Paul wrote, "Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls" (Rm. 14:4). We are responsible only for our own actions. A fourth reason that criticism is a foolish practice is that it tears down rather than builds up. Seldom does it make one want to do better. It usually has the opposite effect. It acts as a sledgehammer that pulverizes the hearts and relationships that God is attempting to grow and develop. And lastly, God says we'll get back what we dish out to others. "For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you (Mt. 7:2). When we criticize someone we are usually insisting on a higher standard for him. The measuring rod we use for others may become God's measuring rod for us.

Clearly, each of us would do well to look at our own lives and engage in some honest self-criticism. Whenever we are tempted to zero in on a fault of another, why don't we ask God to show us one of our own? Then ask Him to help us grow in that area. And when we pray, why not pray as David did, "Search me O God, and know my heart, try me, and my thoughts, and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139:23-24). I believe that this kind of prayer will keep us from being critical of others. And, it will bring healing to our lives and our relationships. May God bless each of you.