

Beyond Criticism

1 Corinthians 4:1-5

8th Sunday after Pentecost

31st July 2011

A father took his 12 year old son to the circus. The boy was particularly amazed by a man on the flying trapeze. He watched incredulously as the fearless performer soared high above the crowd, hanging precariously by his toes. His mouth fell open even wider when the man produced a violin and, holding it behind his back as he zoomed through the air, began to play the intricately difficult "Flight of the Bumble Bee".

"Wow, Dad," exclaimed the boy, "Isn't he incredible?"

"Oh, I don't know," replied the father, quite seriously, "He sounds a little bit out of tune to me."

Paul, in his day, at the dawn of Christianity, was just like this high flying artist. He was doing a fantastic job, spreading the Good News and establishing new churches all around the ancient world. And doing it all in very difficult and challenging circumstances. Constantly travelling. Ever vulnerable to disease. Always wondering where the next meal was coming from.

Yet, despite his great courage and many sacrifices, Paul had many critics. Especially at the church in Corinth. The people there were not happy at all, especially when they realised that, as followers of Jesus, they could not devise their own standards of morality¹ or use their new found Christian freedom without regard for the weaker among them² or lord it over others whom they deemed to have inferior spiritual gifts.³ And Paul bore the brunt of their unhappiness, being subjected to a constant stream of fault-finding and back-biting amidst all his missionary endeavours.⁴

Today, of course, criticism is something of which those in public life, celebrities, politicians and sports stars, are so often the target. Sometimes they deserve it. Rob Ford. Mayor of Toronto. This past week's imprudent gestures and words. Need one say any more?

Then again, how about the criticism aimed at the lawmakers down in Washington? Have they not been on the receiving end of much very justifiable criticism over past days as they have bickered and bargained over debt ceilings and spending cuts? Without gloating or seeming morally superior, thank goodness we here in Canada do these kind of things with much greater dignity and decorum!

On the other hand, there's much unwarranted criticism going around. Like that experienced this past week by young Northern Ireland golfer, Rory McIlroy, at the hands of a Golf Channel commentator, who alleged that his course management was no better than a ten year old's and that he should get rid of his caddy.⁵

Or, how about the criticism levelled this week against the members of the Canadian women's rugby team for not wanting to play for their country in the forthcoming

Nation's Cup in Oakville when they have to pay out \$3,000 for the privilege – expenses that are routinely covered where male national rugby players are concerned.⁶

But criticism is not the sole prerogative of high profile personalities and performers. It's also something to which we ordinary people are no strangers. We are all used to receiving it at some time or another. We may get it from husbands or wives or partners, from brothers or sisters, from sons or daughters, from our boss or colleagues at work or even from friends. The only exception to this is, of course, ministers whom, as we well know, are never criticised by their congregations!

Much criticism is, of course, good and constructive and, when it is such, we have to learn from it and take it to heart.

In his book, *The 911 Handbook*, Kent Crockett says that, "Whenever Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower was about to implement a plan, he would always take the plan to his greatest critics to examine. His critics, of course, would usually proceed to tear his plan apart showing him why it would never work. Someone asked him why he wasted his time showing it to a group of critics instead of taking it to advisors who were sympathetic to his ideas. He answered, 'Because my critics help me find the weaknesses in the plan so I can correct them.'" Crockett goes on to say, "In the same way, God uses the judgmental person to reveal our blind spots so we can make the necessary changes. If we truly want to be pleasing to the Lord, we will accept the exposure of our faults so we can correct them, even if the revelation comes from a hateful person."⁷

However, when criticism is simply negative and vindictive, when it is of the type from which we can learn nothing, it can cause much personal grief. Even, in some circumstances, it can destroy people. The challenge, therefore, is how to handle it. How to understand it. How to keep it in perspective. How to see it in God's perspective.

One of the first things we should remember is that criticism will always be with us, one way or another, no matter what we do, no matter how well-intentioned we may be.

The story goes that, one day, a father, son, and their donkey were travelling from one village to another. The boy walked while the man rode the donkey. The father overheard a bystander say, "That's a shame. Look how that man is making that poor boy walk." Not wanting to be the object of criticism, the father and son changed places. The boy rode the donkey while the man walked. He then heard a woman comment, "Look how that boy on the donkey is making that poor man walk." The father and son both climbed onto the donkey. As they travelled

down the road, someone said, “Look how that man and boy are making that poor donkey suffer.” They both got off and walked. The people remarked, “Look at that stupid man and boy. They’re walking when they could be riding that donkey.” So when they entered the next village, the boy was walking and the man was carrying the donkey! Which all goes to show that, no matter what you do, someone will always find fault.⁸

Another thing to keep in mind when criticism comes our way is that time will tell.

Even though we may not be able to answer our critics properly at the time the criticism is originally made, let’s remember that, if we are in the right, then time is on our side. The passage of time so often makes the real facts of the matter clear to everyone – something to which the very pages of the Gospels bear witness.

“Foolish mad dreamer,” people said of Jesus of Nazareth, when he walked through the countryside of Galilee, “This kingdom he talks about will never come to anything. His memory will evaporate like the morning mist once he is gone. Out of sight will be out of mind. So let’s crucify him and the world will never hear another word about him.” And, of course, these people were right, weren’t they? His name was never spoken again, was it? Not once in all the centuries since!!!

But not only where Jesus was concerned, the passage of time has also radically changed the weight of criticism against many other people down through the course of history. “Columbus is mad,” said his critics at the Spanish royal court, when he talked about a great sea voyage to the west, “The world is flat. He’ll fall over the edge.” And what about Isaac Newton? Just after he had published his Law of Gravitation, one of his critics was heard to remark, “This crazy mathematician will not have twenty followers in his lifetime and soon will be forgotten.” And then there was Abraham Lincoln. Just after he had made his famous Gettysburg Address, a leader in the local newspaper next day stated, “We must pass over these silly remarks of our President. For the credit of our nation we are willing that the veil of oblivion be dropped over them and that they be no more thought of or repeated.”⁹

And the same is true for any of us whenever we are personally subjected to castigation for some fault or failing. Our critics will most often be answered in the same way. Time will tell. When all the issues have been revealed and a proper perspective becomes possible, things will look so different, bringing about vindication and justification. But, of course, we have to remember that this will only work if we give it a chance to work. Time to work. And believe the truth will finally come out.

But not only will time tell when we are unfairly criticised, but also God will tell. God will make known the truth about us and our actions. Let’s remember, of course, that the only one who can make absolute judgements about us is God himself and, at the end of the day, it really is only his word, his verdict, his opinion that really matters.

Isn’t this exactly what Paul declared in his first letter to the Corinthians, “With me,” he says, “it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time.”¹⁰ In the face of the almost constant barrage of abuse and vilification aimed at him, the belief that God alone was his final judge brought him great strength and consolation. Without that conviction he would not have been able to persevere and make the great advances he achieved for God’s kingdom throughout the ancient world.

And the same holds true for us today. God is our ultimate and only judge. He alone is the one to whom, in the final analysis, we are really accountable for all we say and do in this life. Only he can see into our hearts and know what motives and intentions are there. Only he is in a position to issue a definitive verdict on what we do, or do not do, in this life. He alone is our supreme critic.

So the next time unwarranted criticism comes our way, let’s remember that time will tell and God will tell. When we do this, then not only will we be able to cope with whatever criticism comes our way but, more to the point, we will be able to rise above it. And even triumph over it.

© George A. Turner

St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church

Peterborough, Ontario

¹ 1 Corinthians 5:1ff; 7:1ff

² 1 Corinthians 8:1ff

³ 1 Corinthians 1:18ff; 12:1ff; 14:1ff

⁴ 1 Corinthians 4:1-5; 2 Corinthians 11:1ff; 12:1-6

⁵ Graham Otway, “Rory McIlroy: I won’t Back down”, Daily Express, July 30, 2011

⁶ Mary Orsmy, “Female rugby players won’t pay to play”, The Toronto Star, July 28, 2011

⁷ Kent Crockett, *The 911 Handbook*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003, 97-98

⁸ Kent Crockett, *I Once Was Blind But Now I Squint*, Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2004, 109-110

⁹ The Harrisburg Pennsylvania Patriot and Union, cf. Jerry Stratton, “Embarrassed by our president”, <http://www.hoboes.com/Mimsy/?ART=493>

¹⁰ 1 Cor. 4:3ff