

How to handle criticism

Message for Sunday, February 10, 2013
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: various

Children's Message:

(A variation on one of Aesop's fables.)

This is a story from long, long ago.

A farmer said to his son, "Let's go into town and sell our donkey." So the man and his son started walking along the road into town, leading the donkey on a rope behind them.

A young man saw the man and his son and their donkey. He laughed, "You're crazy! Why don't you ride on your donkey?"

"You're right!" said the man and he got on the donkey. The donkey walked in front and the man's son walked behind.

A young woman saw the man riding on the donkey and his young son walking behind. She shouted, "That's not fair! You are big and strong and that poor little boy is tired. He must ride on the donkey. Not you!"

"You're right!" said the man. So the man got off the donkey and he told his son to get on the donkey.

The donkey walked in front and the father walked behind.

An old man saw the boy riding on the donkey and the father walking behind. "Ha! You've got a donkey but you are walking. That's ridiculous!"

"You're right. It is ridiculous!" said the man and so he got on the donkey and sat behind his son.

A poor old woman saw the man and his son riding on the donkey. "That's cruel! That is so cruel! Poor donkey! Get off it at once! It is the donkey's turn. YOU must carry the donkey!"

"Yes, you're right. It's cruel!" said the man. So the man and his son got off the donkey.

Then the man tied the donkey's feet together and then he got a long branch and he put it between the donkey's legs and then the man and his son picked up the donkey and carried him to the market.

"Poor donkey!" everybody shouted. "Put that donkey down! Don't tie its legs! Let it walk!"

"Oh, no!" said the man. "We wanted to make everybody happy. Now everybody is angry with us!"

So the man cut the rope. The donkey stood up and it ran away from these crazy people.

What happens when you try to please everyone?

Jesus says, "Don't judge others." That's what these people were all doing. They were telling the farmer and the son, "What you are doing is wrong. This is what you should do." But they didn't know the whole story.

The farmer would have been better off to just do what he had planned to do. It was the right thing, no matter what others said. Same with you: Do the right thing; that's what matters, not what others think.

Sermon: "How to handle criticism"

It was a fairly normal Sunday on the first pastoral charge I served, which was in northern Newfoundland. I had led worship services in Englee and Roddickton in the morning, and had just finished the evening service in Main Brook. I had noticed that Bessie Pilgrim and her two sons, Melvin and Mervin, were not present. That was unusual; they were regular members of the church, real pillars.

It soon became even more unusual: they entered the church after everyone else had left. "Bruce," Bessie began, "I don't think we can come back to this church any more, not if what we heard this week is true."

"Uh oh. Here it comes," I thought to myself. I felt a vise tighten around my stomach. My armpits suddenly moistened, and I swallowed. I had wondered if something like this might happen, and now it was. "What did you hear, Bessie?" I asked innocently.

"Bruce, we heard that you were playing cards at the nursing home in Roddickton."

"Yes, Bessie, that's true. I was playing cards." (I had offered to play cribbage with a Roman Catholic man who was bored stiff and had no one to play with. He had looked at me like I was crazy, but when he saw that I was sincere, he happily pulled out his game. We hadn't even shuffled the cards when I noticed two elderly women across the room watching us and talking excitedly to each other. That's when I began to wonder.)

"Then that settles it. We can't come to a church where the minister plays with the devil."

That was my first experience of criticism in the church. We all experience criticism in our lives, not just in the church. How do we deal with it — both receiving and giving criticism?

1) The effect of criticism

First of all, though, let's look at how criticism affects us. About a century ago, psychologist Henry Goddard connected some children up to a machine he called the "ergograph." It measured energy levels in a person's body. He found that when tired children are given a word of praise, the ergograph shows an immediate upward surge of new energy. When the children are criticized and discouraged, the ergograph shows their physical energy take a sudden nosedive. Presumably adults would have similar results.

That's why we need to be careful with criticism; it bites.

2) How to give criticism

a) It's OK to criticize

This is one of those topics where the Bible can be confusing. On the one hand, Jesus says, "Do not judge" [Matthew 7:1]. But in other places he says it's our responsibility to correct others.

Luke 17:3-4, Today's English Version:

[Jesus said,] "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him."

The purpose of the criticism is *not* to humiliate or condemn the other person. The purpose is to *help* the other person, by showing how they can do better. You don't help by pointing out all of a person's faults, and not giving any encouragement.

I am one who really needs to learn this principle. So often I am quick to see faults, and slow to praise. We were looking for a ceiling light fixture for the dining room in the manse. Ken Powell is on the Manse Committee, and he and Lorraine were in a store one day and saw what they thought was perfect for that room. So they bought it. The next morning, we were together at the Merlin Hall making apple pies for the church. Lorraine mentioned that they had bought this light for the manse.

She described it, and I immediately pointed out the problems: it wasn't bright enough; it was just a single bulb and wouldn't direct light to the whole room, and so on. Not a word of thanks; no appreciation for thinking about us, absolutely nothing like that. Just criticism.

It was about five minutes later that I realized what I had just done. I went back to Lorraine and apologized for my

attitude. Thankfully, Lorraine is very gracious and she readily forgave me.

b) The motive in criticism: love

Matthew 22:39 (TEV)

[Jesus said,] "The second most important commandment is like it: 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself.' "

When criticism is not done in love, it stings. It will sting even when it's done in love, but not as badly. We should always ask ourselves, "What is my motive in saying this?" Actually, that's a good principle for everything we do and say, not just criticism.

I heard a story about a man who invited his neighbour to attend church with him. On the way home, the neighbour said, "I noticed you have a new preacher." "Yes," said his friend, "We fired the old one. He was always telling us unless we repented, we were going to hell." "But," the neighbour replied, "your new preacher said the very same thing this morning." "True," was the reply, "but our old preacher acted like he was happy about the situation. When our new preacher says this, it seems to break his heart." That's the difference that love makes when we criticize.

c) Give criticism in a sandwich

1 Corinthians 1:4-5, Today's English Version:

I always give thanks to my God for you because of the grace he has given you through Christ Jesus. For in union with Christ you have become rich in all things, including all speech and all knowledge.

Later in this letter to the church in Corinth, Paul writes some strong words, but he begins with appreciation and praise. Later he gets to the painful things: the jealousy and fighting in the church, the sexual immorality, the selfish behaviour of some. And he ends with more encouragement.

This an example of what some people call "the sandwich method." When you have something unpleasant to say to someone, begin first with praise, telling them what a good job they are doing. Then give the criticism. And then conclude by reassuring that you still have confidence in them, trust them and are glad to be part of the same team. You can give criticism, but give it in a sandwich.

3) How to receive criticism

a) Listen without being defensive

Proverbs 9:7-10, Today's English Version:

If you correct conceited people, you will only be insulted. If you reprimand evil people, you will only get hurt. Never correct conceited people; they will hate you for it. But if you correct the wise, they will respect you. Anything you say to the wise will make them wiser. Whatever you tell the righteous will add to their knowledge.

We all like to think we are wonderful. It's not pleasant to hear someone offer a contrary opinion. Our natural reaction is to be defensive, to justify ourselves. This passage in Proverbs says that's what conceited people do. Instead of that, the wise just simply listen.

Besides, they may be saying it in love.

Psalm 141:5, Today's English Version:

Good people may punish me and rebuke me in kindness.

b) Learn from the truth

I know it's hard to imagine, but consider the possibility that, maybe, just maybe, that person may be speaking the truth.

Proverbs 19:25, Today's English Version:

Arrogance should be punished, so that people who don't know any better can learn a lesson. If you are wise, you will learn when you are corrected.

Pride or arrogance is unwilling — even unable — to accept criticism. But a wise person will learn from criticism, and change what needs to be changed.

c) Rise above unfair criticism

Psalm 37:7, God's Word:

Surrender yourself to the Lord, and wait patiently for him.

You know you're surrendered to God when you don't react to criticism and rush to defend yourself. You know you're surrendered to God when you rely on God to work things out instead of trying to make yourself look good.

Back to Paul's letter to the church in Corinth. Not only was he giving them some guidance on the issues they were dealing with, but he was also dealing with the criticism which some of their members said about him. This is his response.

1 Corinthians 4:3-4, Today's English Version:

Now, I am not at all concerned about being judged by you or by any human standard; I don't even pass judgment on myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not prove that I am really innocent. The Lord is the one who passes judgment on me.

Paul makes no attempt to defend himself. He is not troubled by the slander being aimed at him. God is the one he serves, and it is God who will judge him, and he is content to leave it at that. He rises above this unfair criticism.

Wade Boggs played third base for the Boston Red Sox, and was so good that he was voted into the Baseball Hall of Fame immediately when he retired from the game. He hated playing in New York's Yankee Stadium. It wasn't because of the Yankees. Their pitching never gave him much trouble. No, Boggs hated playing in Yankee Stadium because of... a fan. That's right, one person was able to make Boggs' appearances in New York miserable.

This particular fan had a seat close to the third base, and when the Red Sox were in town he would torment Boggs by shouting obscenities and insults. Somehow he knew just what it took to make Boggs miserable, and he kept it up for the entire game, every game.

One day as Boggs was warming up before game in Yankee Stadium, the fan began his typical routine, yelling, "Boggs, you stink," and variations on that theme. Boggs decided he'd had enough. He walked directly over to the man, who was sitting in the stands with his friends, and said, "Hey, fella, are you the guy who's always yelling at me?"

The man said, "Yeah, that's me. What are you going to do about it?" Boggs took a new baseball out of his pocket, autographed it, tossed it to the man, and went back to the field to continue his pregame routine.

The man never yelled at Boggs again. In fact, he became one of Boggs' biggest fans at Yankee Stadium.

Abraham Lincoln put it this way: "I destroy my enemy when I make him my friend."

I asked John Lusina (Fletcher Church) to give his testimony, about how he is no longer bothered by someone calling him names.

Conclusion

You might be wondering what happened between Bessie, Melvin, Mervin and me. I agreed with them, that

they have to follow their convictions. But I asked if, before they left the church, would they first explain to me why they believed that cards were evil.

They looked at me as if I were stunned (a Newfoundland expression for a particularly dense person). It was obvious that cards were evil; everyone knew that. It was like asking them to explain why they liked salt pork scrunchions on their fish and brewis.

It dawned on them that, coming from the mainland, I might not have had a proper upbringing as a child, and thus didn't know any better. They had trusted me, even loved me. By betraying that trust, I had hurt them deeply. I loved them, too, and when I realized what this meant to them, I felt that pain.

We never did agree about playing cards, neither that day nor in the years to come while I was there. But they continued in that church, and were my closest friends in that village.

We all learned something in that experience: when we put Jesus first, other things have a way of falling into place.