

OVERCOMING CRITICISM AND PREJUDICE

1 Peter 2:21-23
Ephesians 4:29-32

Another set of experiences that Jesus faced throughout His life on earth was criticism and prejudice - and as Peter tells us – He suffered because of it – it hurt Him deeply and I’m sure that He was tempted to get even – it’s a natural reaction to want to hurt those who hurt us – our carnal nature cries out for justice, “I’ve been hurt, now let the one who hurt me be hurt too.”

We suffer criticism and prejudice even in the church – amongst those who are called to love each other and to do unto others as you would have them do unto you this sin of insult and counter-insult is devastating.

It’s been said that the Christian army is the only army that shoots its wounded – I’ve been there and can testify how hurtful it is and how strong the urge is to hurt back – even years after the incident thoughts of revenge still haunt me.

Friends, the reality is that criticism and prejudice is part of life on earth – we will face it from without when on the receiving end and we will face it from within when tempted to give it out.

So it becomes imperative to know how to deal with it because giving it out can be just as devastating as receiving it if we don’t deal with it appropriately.

Jesus on another occasion said (John 13:35):

“All people will know that you are my followers if you love each other.”

Friends, I’m convinced that over the years there’s been nothing more damaging to the witness of the church than the inability to “love one another” and so this morning I want to have a look at what we need to do to prevent criticism and prejudice taking root in our life

and damaging our witness and then how we are to respond to criticism and prejudice when it comes our way.

The truth that comes to us from God's Word in this regard is that "Words are powerful".

In Proverbs 18:21 we read:

"The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit."

This verse says that words have the power to either give life or destroy life – but let me unpack the verse a little more.

You may have heard the statement, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never harm me".

Well the truth is that words do hurt – they can harm us – they may not break our bones but they can break our heart – and in many cases a broken heart is more painful than a broken bone and often takes a lot longer to heal.

Words can have a very negative effect on us – when someone gossips about you or criticizes you for something you have done or not done it can really hurt – even to the point of making you feel bad about yourself.

If this verbal abuse carries on long enough you may develop a low self-image, which can eventually lead to depression and in extreme cases even suicide.

We've all heard of the bullying that goes on, on social media – especially amongst teenagers – and how in extreme cases it leads to suicide.

We must realise that the tongue is very powerful – listen to what James has to say about it in a letter he wrote to a few churches that were having a problem with the very issue of criticism and prejudice (James 3:8-10):

"... no one can tame the tongue. It is wild and evil and full of deadly poison. We use our tongues to praise our Lord and Father, but then we curse people, whom God made like

himself. Praises and curses come from the same mouth! My brothers and sisters, this should not happen.”

But there’s a flip side to this - words can also have a very positive effect on us.

They can make us feel really good about ourselves – when someone affirms you or compliments you for something you have done it can just make your day.

It was Mark Twain who said – “I can two weeks off a single compliment”.

Paul said Ephesians 4:29:

“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

We are exhorted to build each other up and it doesn’t take much to make a positive difference in someone’s life – it only takes a few words of encouragement at the appropriate time.

If our words are to be of benefit to others then we need to take the advice given by a wise person many years ago (Proverbs 13:3):

“Those who are careful about what they say protect their lives, but whoever speaks without thinking will be ruined.”

We need to be those who think of the consequences before we speak because once a word is out you can’t take it back – it’s like toothpaste; once it’s out the tube there’s no way you can get it back in again – once a word is spoken it will either bring life or destroy life and you will bear the fruit of it - therefore our motivation in whatever we say should be to speak the truth in love.

The point here is that not all criticism is negative – there is criticism that is constructive and can build others up so long as our motivation is always to speak the truth in love.

In Proverbs 27:17 we read, “As iron sharpens iron, a friend sharpens a friend.”

If you want to sharpen a knife, you pull it through a sharpener that's made of metal that is harder than the knife.

In a similar fashion the Lord uses His followers to sharpen each other so that they are able to follow in the steps of Jesus and bear witness to the love of God.

Speaking the truth in love means that we will be willing to challenge incorrect behaviour – be willing to challenge a brother or sister's conduct when it is not in line with the truth taught by God's Word and then point them in the right direction.

We must keep in mind that the aim of speaking the truth is to draw the person back to devotion to Christ – the purpose is always redemptive – never to humiliate or condemn or judge.

In Proverbs we read (Pr 25:11-12):

“The right word spoken at the right time is as beautiful as gold apples in a silver bowl.

Valid criticism is as treasured by the one who heeds it as jewelry made from finest gold.”

In speaking the truth in love timing is very important – that's why it's wise to be guided by the Holy Spirit – speaking the truth in love at the wrong time can have devastating consequences – but if it's done correctly then Paul says that a community that “speaks the truth in love, will grow up in every way into Christ ...” (Ephesians 4:14-15).

Let's face it, no-one likes to be told they are wrong and initially they might resent being corrected, but if we persist in a spirit of love, trying to help each other become who God wants us to be then it can be a very precious gift – one we must not be afraid to use.

Again there's a flip side here which is also true – as those who are committed to following Christ we must be willing to receive this gift without retaliating or trying to defend ourselves – rather take time to reflect on what's been said to see if it is really God speaking to you and then respond in the correct way.

Proverbs again gives wise counsel (Pr 15:31):

“If you listen to constructive criticism, you will be at home among the wise.”

How then do we react to cruel or unjust criticism and prejudice that is levelled at us?

Jesus’ response was not to retaliate or threaten revenge but to “leave His case in the hands of God, who judges fairly”.

Let me try and explain this through a little story.

Stanley Jones, a well-known missionary to India, tells of a time he had a problem with his spiritual reputation.

For a number of years he had supported a prominent man financially and when the time came that he could no longer support him, the man turned on him and criticised him in the public press.

So, Stanley Jones sat down and wrote a letter of reply – the kind of reply you don’t give your opponent a leg to stand on – as he put it, “the kind of reply you are proud of the first five minutes, the second five minutes you’re not so certain and the third five minutes you know you’re wrong.”

But before he mailed the letter, he sent it to the people of his community for their opinion.

They sent it back with just three words in the margin, “Not sufficiently redemptive”.

As Jones read those words he was devastated – he knew that he was winning the argument but losing his man.

He came to the realisation that the “Christian is not in the business of winning arguments, but of winning people” and so he tore up the letter and said, “Lord, you’ll have to take care of my reputation”.

A few weeks later he received a letter of apology from the man who had turned on him.

Friends, when we are un-surrendered to Christ we tend to be unable to bear insults and criticism and easily give in to feelings of retaliation and revenge.

But when we surrender to Christ, who fills and cleanses us with the love of God, we can bear all things, endure all things and be those who are able to impact others by our words and deeds.

Let us not “fail in love” by criticising maliciously and harbouring prejudice towards other brothers and sisters of Christ who may not think or have the same viewpoint as us.

Let us not “fail in love” when we are treated contemptuously for our particular viewpoint or when we’re met with criticism for the good we try and do – let’s meet slander with affection, scorn with service, ostracism with the right hand of fellowship – let’s go on loving – because that’s following in the steps of Jesus or as John put it, “remaining in Christ”.

Bible Study Questions:

Was there anything that came out of Sunday’s Worship service that you would like to discuss or comment on?

Read 1 Peter 2:21-23 & Ephesians 4:29-32

1. In what ways did Jesus experience criticism and prejudice?
2. Why do mere words produce hurt in us?
3. How can we avoid criticism destroying us?
4. How can we ensure our criticism is constructive rather than destructive?
5. Why do people exhibit prejudice and criticize others destructively?
6. How do you feel about Christians of other denominations? How can we create fellowship with them?
7. How should Christians relate to people of other faiths and ethnic origins?
8. When can pride in one’s own group or nation become bigotry?