

## **The Ins and Outs of Judging** *1 Corinthians 4:1-5*

To be completely honest, I will be glad to see the end of our time in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians and move on to something else. Anything else! I haven't enjoyed these past few weeks anywhere near as much as I thought I would when I planned this a few months ago. See, the task of a preacher on Sunday morning is to take a passage of scripture that was written for a specific situation in a specific time and place – a time very long ago, and in a place that was very different from ours – and say, *see, aren't we just like that? Those same words, written so long ago, still apply to us today.*

But that hasn't been easy these past few weeks. Paul was writing to a church with a lot of problems. It was a church that had a lot of conflict in it, and as I mentioned a few weeks ago, one commentator likened the church members there to a bunch of sailors on shore leave. So when it comes to making that jump from the situation back then to the one here and now; no, we aren't just like that! You all are a strong, healthy congregation, and it hasn't always been easy to find something in Paul's words that is relevant to us in our contemporary situation.

And today is no different. In today's verses Paul is responding to some flak he had been getting from the folks at the church who didn't think he was such a good pastor or preacher. 'Clergy-bashing' is what some call it today. Fussing about everything from the pastor's beard, to the kind of vehicle she drives, to taking a stand on social or political issues. Not relevant here; there's no, "and aren't we just like that?" message in these verses. I brag about you all wherever I go. You have been incredibly gracious and generous and kind. I couldn't ask for a more supportive congregation. The situation in Corinth is not the situation at Covenant.

So what's a preacher to do? When my congregation is not, in fact, like Paul's congregation, what message do I bring you from today's scripture?

I think it is Paul's answer to them that points us in the right direction. Jesus had a lot to say about being judgmental of others back in the gospels, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, which we have also been making our way through. Don't judge, take the log out of your own eye before getting the speck out of your neighbor's, that kind of thing. But Paul's response invites us to look at it from the other side and think about how we should respond when someone has passed judgment on us.

It happens all the time, doesn't it? On big stuff, small stuff, everything in between. You're judged on your grades. Your weight. The clothes you wear. People freely comment on what they think about the job you did. They laugh at the idea you threw out there. They tell you they don't understand how you can call yourself a Christian and believe the way you do, or vote the way you did. They talk about how you raise your children, or suggest that you could have put more time and thought into the lesson.

Or in Paul's case, they'll say that you aren't very good at your job.

And here's how Paul handles those comments – he shrugs it off. He isn't stung; he isn't devastated by their biting words. He doesn't quit or threaten to quit. It doesn't cause him to give in to despair or question his vocation. He doesn't resent them for it, or turn his back on them in bitterness. His self-esteem isn't one bit shattered by their evaluation. He just shrugs it all off.

How does he do that? Or even more importantly, how can *we* learn to do that, to hear the harsh or uncomfortable comments of others and not be crushed by them? The late theologian and ethicist, Lewis Smedes, suggests that we learn to make the distinction between critics and judges, criticism and judging.

Critics, he says, give their opinion. *That was a dumb idea. You could have done a better job. I don't think you have what it takes. I expected more out of you. You paid money for that haircut?* Despite what they may think, they aren't stating facts, they are telling you what they think, what they believe is true. They are giving you their opinion. And then we have a choice: we can take it or we can leave it.

That's not the same as blowing them off, saying, *well, that's your opinion*, and walking away. That isn't what Paul is doing when he shrugs off those snarky, anonymous notes stuffed into the comments box. Interestingly, Smedes says the same thing about critics that C.S. Lewis says about demons – the two worst mistakes we can make are either to take them too seriously or ignore them. Take your critics too seriously and you end up in bed with the blinds drawn and the covers over your head, your self-esteem and self-confidence getting more battered and bruised with every correction or comment you get.

But ignore your critics completely and we miss out on the opportunity for self-examination. Maybe that person was just mean and jealous and petty, or, maybe there was some small kernel of truth in their criticism. Maybe, couched in some really unkind words and the intention to hurt, was something that we need to pay attention to – some behavior that needs correcting, something in our demeanor that sends people the wrong message, some deep, hidden pain that is coming out in ways that aren't healthy or helpful. Paul may have ultimately brushed off the comments from his critics in Corinth, but that doesn't mean he didn't think there was a place for Christians to look at their lives and actions, and do some serious soul searching.

But here's the thing, your critics may be able to point out some aspect of your life that needs attention, but what they don't have the power to do is tell you that you are a bad person, or that all your ideas are dumb and you should never open your mouth again. They can't tell you that you are ugly, or worthless, or uncool, or not important. They may or may not have some morsel of insight that is worth considering and taking to heart. But they do not have the power to judge you. They do not have the power to tell you what kind of person you are.

In fact, you don't even have the power or authority to judge yourself; to make a final determination about your worth, your value, whether or not you are average or extraordinary. You don't have that ability. No one does. You lack the lens to see yourself objectively enough to do that. We don't even know ourselves well enough, deeply enough, to judge ourselves. We feel good about ourselves one day because we did a good deed, and the next day we are down on ourselves because we lost our temper, or didn't do well on a test. We look at ourselves and we

see a collection of traits and behaviors, failures and successes. We see what the world has taught us to see in ourselves, and we are in no position to judge.

There's only one person who can do that. God. God sees past all of those things that we get stuck on – our weight, our talent or lack of, our frizzy hair, or nervousness in crowds, the tendency to say the wrong thing. God even sees past our sunny smile and great grades. God sees deeper, to the real person deep inside of us. Someone we may not even know is in there. The person God created us to be.

God's no fool. God knows all that other stuff, the failures and inadequacies and shortcomings. God knows them full well. But when God judges us, God judges us in love, with compassion, with tenderness.

Jesus said we would always have the poor with us, but he could also have said that we would always have critics with us. But they are just that, critics, giving their opinion. Listen to it, think about it. Take it, or leave it. But don't let them pass judgment on you. They don't have the power to do that. Only God does, and the God of mercy is your friend.