

## How to handle criticism - # 7 in “The Greatest Sermon in History”

Message for Sunday, July 17, 2016  
by Bruce Fraser

**Scripture:** Matthew 7:1-5, and others

*The Greatest Sermon in History is the message given by Jesus Christ as recorded in Matthew 5-7. This series aims to apply Jesus' timeless truths to the situations that people face today.*

**Message, Part 1:** “Learn from a donkey”  
(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.

**Message, Part 2:** “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 cribbage board and deck of cards. 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?

In the Bible passage we’re looking at today, Jesus talks about the danger of judging others. We may not think that we’re judgemental, but all of us criticize others, which is just about the same thing.

## 1) It’s OK to criticize

Matthew 7:1–5, New Living Translation:

“Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged.

“And why worry about a speck in your friend’s eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying to your friend, ‘Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,’ when you can’t see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend’s eye.”

This is one of those topics where the Bible can be confusing. Although Jesus begins by saying, “Do not judge others,” he immediately adds to that some words of caution of *how* to judge others: don’t use a double-standard, and deal with your own issues before criticizing others. He never suggests that we

should pretend that our friend doesn’t have a speck in their eye. In fact, in other places he says it’s our *responsibility* to correct others.

Luke 17:3-4, Today’s English Version:

“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.”

I think the point here is not so much about judging, but about being judgmental: thinking that you are better than others, and are in a position to tell them how to be better. In other words, “If you were more like me, you’d be a better person.

*I played part of the soundtrack from “My Fair Lady,” where Henry Higgins sings “Why can’t a woman be more like me?”*

## 2) Criticism bites; use it carefully

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, 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.

## 3) How to give criticism

### a) The motive in criticism: love

Matthew 22:39, Good News Bible:

[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.

Let’s be clear about the difference between being judgemental and being critical.

	<b>Judgemental</b>	<b>Critical</b>
<b>Motive</b>	Pride in feeling superior	Genuine love for others
<b>Purpose</b>	To humiliate or put down	To help others

When we give criticism, do it with an attitude of grace and understanding.

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.

#### **b) 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.

## **4) 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 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."

### **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 our 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.

### **Next Steps:**

- It's OK to criticize, if you do it in a spirit of love and help and encouragement.
- But before you criticize, improve your own behaviour.
- Receive criticism with the same attitude: this person may be harsh, but wants to help me. So listen for the truth, even if it hurts.
- If the criticism is unfair, you might try explaining your way. Otherwise, just brush it off. Arguing rarely helps.