

Critical Thinking, Critical Speech

When I was thinking about what to speak on this week, I was thumbing through Paul's letter to the Romans in my New Living Translation and I came across an unusual heading to begin chapter 14: "The Danger of Criticism". I turned to my New International Version to see what title those editors had put on Romans 14 and found: "The Weak and the Strong". That was much more familiar and I remembered that the content of the chapter dealt with people whose conscience is easily troubled. For example, some people in Paul's day were vegetarians, for the sake of their conscience, while others felt free to eat anything. Some people didn't drink wine, while others were sure that was fine. Some, with a Jewish background, felt that the Sabbath was a holy day and should be treated differently, while others said that all days were the same and they would worship God with enthusiasm on whatever day they chose - even on a Sunday - while the Jewish background believers chose to worship on the Saturday.

Guess what? All those groups are still with us today! There are Christians who worship between sundown on Friday and sundown on Saturday - they're called Seventh Day Adventists. There are Christian vegans and vegetarians and Christians who don't know what to do with vegetables when they see them on the plate. There are tee-totalers who will never touch a drink of alcohol and there are those who almost never sit down to dinner without a glass of wine. Which group is right?

To get to the end of the sermon before we get to the middle, Paul's answer is that there is no right answer - but there is a better way. But before we dig into the conclusion, let's look at why these things are issues - especially in our day - and then we can look at how we are taught to live with one another in spite of our differences of habit, of belief, or of opinion.

I'm sure we've all heard the expression, "Everyone's a critic." It's not a new expression, because it speaks to the reality that we all have an opinion and most of us are willing to express it, even when it's not well-founded or well thought out, but it's become even more descriptive of our culture since the internet became the common means of communication, of sharing, not just photos, but opinions, judgments, criticisms.

It's ironic to me that the professional critics, those who have taken courses in journalism and have made their careers out of expressing their opinions of all forms of art, are now being shoved to the background by the number of Facebook likes or Twitter endorsements a new movie or book or music group might garner. The professional critics used to be able to mold public tastes, at least to some degree, but now "everyone's a critic" has become real on a more widely communicated level, and "everyone's" judgment has become more influential than the professional's judgment.

So, here's one of the issues I want to look at today. If we are all critics, isn't that because we all have to be, to some degree, discerning in our tastes? Don't we all have to sort out the good from the bad and choose those things that are truly beautiful, noble, wise, helpful, true and right? So how can we be discerning without being critical - or is

that even a choice? Is there any difference between what's known as critical thinking and critical speech?

And another issue is to ponder why there is so much criticism in the church, especially in the area of doctrine, specific and often very minor areas of belief where people looking at the same set of Scriptures can have differing views. It's not the differences, but the hostility which those differences provoke, that is concerning. **Critical Thinking, Critical Speech . . . p. 3**

So, with some questions rolling around in our minds, let's turn to the text of Romans 14 and see what counsel the apostle Paul has for us:

Accept Christians who are weak in faith, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong. For instance, one person believes it is all right to eat anything. But another believer who has a sensitive conscience will eat only vegetables. Those who think it is all right to eat anything must not look down on those who won't. And those who won't eat certain foods must not condemn those who do, for God has accepted them. Who are you to condemn God's servants? They are responsible to the Lord, so let Him tell them whether they are right or wrong. The Lord's power will help them do as they should.

In the same way, some think one day is more holy than another day, while others think every day is alike. Each person should have a personal conviction about this matter. Those who have a special day for worshiping the Lord are trying to honor Him. Those who eat all kinds of food do so to honor the Lord, since they give thanks to God before eating. And those who won't eat everything also want to please the Lord and give thanks to God.

Paul goes on a little digression from verses 7-9, so let's skip on to verse 10:

So why do you condemn another Christian? Why do you look down on another Christian? Remember, each of us will stand personally before the judgment seat of God. For the Scriptures say:

"As surely as I live," says the Lord, "every knee will bow to Me and every tongue will confess allegiance to God."

Yes, each of us will have to give a personal account to God. So don't condemn each other anymore. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not put an obstacle in another Christian's path.

I know and am perfectly sure on the authority of the Lord Jesus that no food, in and of itself, is wrong to eat. But if someone believes it is wrong then for that person it is wrong. And if another Christian is distressed by what you eat, you are not acting in love if you eat it. Don't let your eating ruin someone for whom Christ died. Then you will not be condemned for doing something you know is all right.

For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. If you serve Christ with this attitude, you will please God and other people will approve of you, too. So then, let us aim for harmony in the church and try to build each other up.

Don't tear apart the work of God over what you eat. Remember, there is nothing wrong with these things in themselves. But it is wrong to eat anything if it makes another person stumble. Don't eat meat or drink wine or do anything else if it might cause another Christian to stumble. You may have the faith to believe that there is nothing wrong with what you are doing, but keep it between yourself and God. (Rom. 14:1-6;10-22)

It's a long passage, but there are some really important things for us to lay hold of, so I didn't want to cut it short. The issues of the day had a different color to them than those same issues do today. There were issues around eating meat that had been offered to idols, and whether or not you could be certain that the meat you were eating had NOT been offered to idols. There were issues around how much wine was being consumed at the communion meal - especially in Corinth. So, rather than spending time in digging through their cultural situation, I think there is enough in this passage that speaks directly to our lives, so I'll go there.

1. The first verse hit me in a new way in this New Living Translation: "Accept Christians who are weak in faith and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong." What's the point in arguing with someone about something that troubles them? Are you going to cause all their pinpricks of conscience to go away by blasting them with arguments? Or do you feel like it's somehow important that they are convinced to drink alcohol or eat meat or worship on Sunday, when they think it's not God's best? "Don't argue with them" is Paul's counsel and it's also the way that makes for peace. I think we like to be right, and because we like to prove that we are right, we are willing to argue the point. But we're not doing it for the sake of the other person, but for our own sake, to prove that our argument is better. Maybe you don't like to argue and you avoid disputes with serious effort, but a lot of people enjoy the argument and don't see the effect it might be having on the person they are trying to defeat ... by their brilliance.
2. "Those who think it is all right to eat anything must not look down on those who won't." Paul sees the problem that precipitates the arguments that can be hurtful: the problem is pride, looking down on those who disagree with you. And then he flips the script and describes what's going on for the person on the other side, and they have an issue with pride as well. "Those who won't eat certain foods must not condemn those who do." So, whether you're looking down on someone in the superiority of your freedom in Christ, or whether you're judging, condemning someone in your superiority as an observer of some set of rules, the issue that separates you is pride.
3. The third aspect that we need to look at is related to the last one, and it answers, at least in a way, the question, "Who do you think you are?" "They are responsible to the Lord, so let Him tell them whether they are right or wrong. The Lord's power will help them do as they should." Oh, I think Paul is saying that God can correct people who are in the wrong and that He can empower them to act in line with the truth. Is that the way you read that text? "Let the Lord tell them whether they are right or wrong and His power will help them do as they should." That means that we are not needed as the voice that speaks judgment, that speaks condemnation, into the lives of the people we know. God's voice is so much more accurate and so much easier to

receive. Does that mean we never speak truth into people's lives? That's not the context that Paul is writing about here - he's talking about the friction that comes from arguing about things that aren't central to Christian faith. In that context, he says we aren't to be argumentative.

4. The fourth thing I see in this passage is Paul's encouragement to believe the best about what is motivating other Christians. Of people on both sides of their issues, Paul says, "They are trying to honor the Lord ... they want to please the Lord and give thanks to God." That seems to carry more weight than doing everything in what you or I would consider the "right way". How many times do we see in the Bible that God looks at things differently, that He puts a higher value on the heart, while we tend to focus on externals? Paul is saying that the heart behind the worship is more important than the day of worship. He's saying that the choice to eat only vegetables, if it's done to honor God, rather than just for personal health or to lose weight or some other motivation, is appreciated by the Lord. While people will make an issue of their interpretation of the rules, God looks at what's inside our heart.
5. In the middle of our passage, Paul seems to digress a bit to talk about each of us standing before the judgment seat of God, giving an account of our lives. What's the connection between these verses, 10-12, and what comes before and after? The key to understanding this is found in verse 13: *"So don't condemn each other anymore. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not put an obstacle in another Christian's path."* This is a critically important principle. We can have all the ideas and opinions we want, but if they cause someone else to stumble, if we somehow promote a practice that causes a person to violate their own conscience, then we'll have to give an account for that. We acted in pride rather than love and someone else suffered because of our action - God isn't pleased when we do that.
6. The sixth aspect from this chapter that I want us to give some attention to is how important a person's conscience is, not just to themselves, but to God as well. "If someone believes it is wrong, then for that person it is wrong." In this example, Paul is talking about the food we eat and says that everything is permissible. But for the person whose conscience troubles them about eating certain things, who is in doubt about it - for a Jew it might be pork or certain kinds of birds (you can read all about it in the laws of the Old Testament), Paul says that that person should abstain. Later on he says that a person's degree of faith determines whether they will be troubled by such an action, but then basically says - that shouldn't matter to us.
7. The seventh principle comes out of number five: we saw there that we are called to avoid the language of judgment, of condemning others, of putting obstacles in their path towards maturity in Christ and, instead, to live in a way that doesn't impede their progress in Christ in any way. Our life, our words, our way of relating, encourages them to grow in Christ. Now, here in verse 17, we see the positive alternatives to words that cause others to stumble as they try to follow Jesus. The positive is this: "living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. If you serve Christ with this attitude, you will please God and other people will approve of you, too." The result is harmony in the church and people who are working at building each other up. Looking at that from the other direction, it is our critical attitudes and our critical words, that keep the church from becoming mature and fully functioning.

8. Finally, number 8. If you have to talk about it, if you have to defend yourself without someone asking, you're not acting out of faith. If you have to do the thing that causes someone else to stumble, whether it's eating or drinking something they think is not God-approved or doing something on a day that they consider is holy, you're not acting out of faith. Paul says, "You may have the faith to believe that there is nothing wrong with what you are doing, but keep it between yourself and God." (14:22). In other words, you can believe that one or more of these activities is okay for you - and Paul agrees with you - he says that the Kingdom of God "is not a matter of what we eat or drink" ... BUT, you shouldn't flaunt your freedom in front of someone who doesn't experience that freedom as you do. "Don't eat meat or drink wine or do anything else if it might cause another Christian to stumble." That's the law of love at work. You care more for someone who doesn't yet fully know God's love and doesn't yet live in the freedom of grace, than you care about your own freedom. You'd give it up just to show you care about the weaker brother or sister - that's love in action.

I raised another question as I started this message: how does Paul's teaching impact an issue such as discernment, sorting out the good from the bad?

Critical thinking is a quite separate issue and really has nothing directly to do with judging other people. Critical thinking is being careful to sort out what's true from what is false. It's using the principles of Scripture to help you determine your course of action. It's being careful to think rightly about something so that you can choose well how to respond to others. Discernment is not the same as negativity, although I've heard people who like to judge others describe their "gift" of criticism as being a gift of discernment - it's not the same thing at all.

We need to be able to be objective about information that comes to us and we need to make godly judgments for our own lives and for those we lead, but none of that gives permission to be harsh, to put people down, to embarrass them or provoke them to respond badly. You don't see any of that in the way Paul writes here in Romans 14. His motivation is what is best for the church and for the individual - and what is best for the church and for each person who follows Jesus, is the principle I described in number 7: "living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." If our lives are characterized by goodness and peace and joy, then it's very unlikely that we will be causing others to stumble, to be tripped up in their faith because of something we have done. If we're operating in peace and joy, we're going to be concerned about the thoughts and emotions and reactions of someone who isn't yet mature enough to live under grace. And we're going to take care of them as best we can, making allowances for something we might call their legalistic tendencies, just so that we can have harmony in the church and so that we can be all about the main thing, which is to build each other up in our faith and grow to maturity together as followers of Jesus Christ.