

New Vision

My Big Fat Mouth • Cut the Criticism • Galatians 5:14-15 • 03/04/2018

Main Point

Criticizing tears each other down and robs us of our joy. In Christ, God calls us to build each other up.

Introduction

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Where do you see or experience people being the most critical of others (work, school, church, home, with friends, TV, social media, etc.)?

What are some of the character traits or internal struggles that can lead people to having a critical attitude?

To criticize means “to act as a critic,” pointing out what you perceive to be the strengths and flaws of someone or something. Yet in our fallen world, it often seems much easier to focus on the flaws. Pride, jealousy, insecurity, perfectionism, personal pain, and a lack of compassion are some of the negative human traits that contribute to a culture of tearing each other down. But in Christ, God calls us to a higher standard. In this study, we will look at some of Paul’s teachings to see how God calls us to build one another up.

Understanding

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| Have a volunteer read Galatians 5:14-15.

What did Paul mean by “bite and devour”? How do you see this happen among Christians?

What did Paul say would be the final outcome of this biting and devouring?

Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God with all of your being, and that loving your neighbor as yourself is the second greatest (Matthew 22:37-40). Did Paul contradict Jesus here? How can loving your neighbor as yourself fulfill the command to love God with your whole being?

Paul was not contradicting Jesus for at least two reasons. First, if we do not love our neighbor as our self, we are certainly not loving God since He created our neighbor and commanded us to love them. Second, Paul made it clear in this passage that we cannot love our neighbors without the help of God's Spirit (Gal. 5:16-18), which is only received through a relationship with Jesus Christ.

What does it look like to “Love your neighbor as yourself”?

Does love mean we never hold people accountable or say anything that is hard to hear? How do you differentiate between “constructive” and “destructive” criticism?

It seems loving someone is sometimes reduced either to just a feeling or to a relationship where we never say anything that is hard for the other person to hear. But the Bible teaches that loving others means actively seeking their good, and this sometimes involves holding others accountable.

| Have a volunteer read Galatians 6:1-2.

How did Paul say we should hold each other accountable? What actions are involved?

Paul wrote to use gentleness when restoring someone caught in sin, and to walk with one another in our struggles (carry each other's burdens). This follows Jesus' message of dealing with the plank in our own eye before helping someone with the speck in their eye (Matthew 7:1-5). This is a far cry from criticizing, which simply points out flaws without humility, mutual trust, or a willingness to help.

| Have a volunteer read Ephesians 4:29.

Paul used the word translated “unwholesome,” “foul,” or “corrupt” in various translations to convey speech that is worthless.

In your life, where do you see yourself contributing rotten or worthless talk, specifically in the form of criticism?

According to this passage, what is the only kind of talk that should come out of our mouths?

What is the goal of such talk?

Some Bible translations say that our speech should “benefit those who listen,” while more literal translations say some version of “that it may give grace to those who hear.” Grace is a gift, undeserved favor, and in the case of Ephesians 4, Paul used grace in the sense of Christ's spiritual gifts that allow us to minister to others and do His will. Thus, our speech should be characterized by love, encouragement, and helping others grow in maturity for serving the Lord.

| Have a volunteer read 2 Corinthians 13:11.

What is the first thing Paul commanded his readers to do in this verse?

How can rejoicing help us combat a critical attitude?

According to this verse, what does your church need to do in order to experience the presence of the God of love and peace?

The New Testament repeatedly commands followers of Christ to submit to the Spirit's work in us and to live lives characterized by love, encouragement, unity and peace. In this way, not only is each individual built up to maturity in Christ, but also the church itself is strengthened and becomes a more effective witness for the power of the gospel. This all starts with allowing the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts and train our tongues.

Application

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Where or with whom do you need to replace criticism with encouragement? Think of some specific people who can use your encouragement right now. What are some practical ways you can encourage them? What spiritual gifts do you see in them that you can call out?

How often do you find yourself rejoicing (praising God, intentionally thanking God and others, expressing joy)? How can you incorporate more rejoicing in your life? Where do you need help rejoicing in your day?

How would a lifestyle of rejoicing give more credibility in sharing the gospel with others?

Pray

Ask the Father to grant you the grace, humility, and courage to replace your critical attitudes with rejoicing and encouragement, that you may help another believer grow to maturity in Christ.

Commentary

| Galatians 5:14-15

5:13-14. In verse 1, Paul states that Christian freedom is the right and privilege of every believer. Then he points out six negative consequences of falling back into slavery. Now he warns them not to use this freedom as a license to sin. Rather than liberty being used for selfishness, the true objective of their newfound freedom is love. Quoting Leviticus 19:18, Paul summarizes the law as "love your neighbor as yourself." Always remember that we are slaves commissioned to love one another (Matt. 22:39).

5:15. As a result of the legalists, this church was divided. They were biting and devouring each other. Their church and community of faith were on the verge of destruction. Legalism treats people harshly and often leads to divisions.

Ephesians 4:29

4:29. Paul gave concrete examples of how Christ followers live out this worthy walk, beginning in verse 25. In each case, a prohibition is balanced with a command. Here, it is not “corrupting talk” but wholesome speech. By corrupting talk Paul meant what is vulgar, crude, or abusive. This is a characteristic of the non-Christian lifestyle that believers have renounced. What is to replace it? Speech that is intentionally good for the building up of others (Prov. 15:23).

2 corinthians 13:11

13:11 The final lines of the letter shift from stern scoldings to a more affectionate tone. The shift in tone is no less sudden than the one between chap. 9 and chap. 10. Those who claim that 2 Corinthians consists of more than one letter must decide to which letter this closing originally belonged. Some commentators claim that such a mild, gentle, and loving conclusion following such a menacing onslaught in 13:1–10 does not fit, so it must have been originally the salutation to chaps. 1–9. But we can see a similar switch in mood in 2 Thess 3:10–15 and 3:16–18. We reject the premise that a shift in tone and subject matter is a reliable indicator that a letter has been doctored by a later editor.

The NIV translation, “Finally, brothers, good-by,” interprets the verb *chairete* as a word of farewell. It appears frequently in secular letters as a word of greeting (in the NT, see Acts 15:23; 23:26; Jas 1:1, which have the infinitive *chairein*). But the word could also mean “rejoice.” After “expressions of anxiety, self-defense, castigation of opponents and sarcasm,” some commentators think that an exhortation to rejoice would be incongruous. But the weight of evidence argues for the translation “rejoice.” Paul has used this verb to mean “rejoice” in 13:9. First Thessalonians 5:16 provides a parallel in which *chairete* (“rejoice”) heads the list of final exhortations. This exhortation would recall Paul’s summary of his apostolic work in Corinth, “but we work with you for your joy” (1:24; see 2:3).

The verb translated “aim for perfection” (*katartizesthe*) is a cognate of the noun “restoration” (*katartismos*, NIV “perfection”) in 13:9. It could be passive or middle voice. If it is middle, Paul is telling them, “Mend your ways”; if passive, “May your ways be mended” or “Be restored.”

“Listen to my appeal” (*parakaleisthe*) could also mean “exhort one another” (see 1 Thess 4:18; 5:11), but the reciprocal pronoun is absent. If it means exhort here, then the passive is more appropriate to what precedes, “be exhorted.” But this is the same word that Paul uses to open the letter by talking about the comfort that he has received from God and with which he comforts others (1:3–7). It may mean “be comforted.” The NIV translation, “listen to my appeal,” assumes that it means basically the same thing as Heb 13:22, “Brothers, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation.” But of the eighteen times the verb *parakalein* appears in 2 Corinthians, nine times it means “to comfort” (1:4, 6; 2:7; 7:6, 7, 13), and eight times it means “to beseech” or “entreat” (2:8; 5:20; 6:1; 8:6; 9:5; 10:1; 12:8; 18). If *parakaleisthe* is rendered as a middle voice in 13:11, it

would be the only time that the verb appears in the middle voice in the letter. If it is rendered as a passive, the four other times the verb appears in the passive it means “comfort” (1:4, 6; 7:7, 13). This evidence suggests that the word means “be comforted” and repeats the theme with which Paul opened the letter. It makes this an astonishing appeal. They have recently mutinied against him, and he suspects that they continue to engage in flagrant sin. He must trust that the living and merciful God who has comforted him so many times in the past will work in their midst to bring about the needed reformation and comfort them as well. Paul’s hope for the congregation is that as they share in his sufferings, so they will also share in his comfort.

“Be of one mind” (see also Rom 12:16; 15:5; and Phil 2:2; 4:2) recalls the dissension alluded to in 12:20, “quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder.” It does not mean that they need to agree in everything, but they do need to be intent on the same purpose (see 1 Cor 1:10).

“Live in peace” echoes the command of Jesus in Mark 9:50: “Be at peace with each other.” That command concludes a discourse that began with the disciples disputing among themselves about their status (9:33–37) and included Jesus’ warning about causing other believers to stumble (9:42–48). It presents “peaceful fellowship as the model for disciples’ relations.” Paul applies the exhortation to live in peace to Christians’ relationships with outsiders (“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace,” Rom 12:18; see 1 Cor 7:15) and fellow Christians (“Live in peace with each other,” 1 Thess 5:13; see Rom 14:19). These five imperatives, “rejoice,” “be restored,” “be comforted,” “be of one mind,” and “live in peace,” sum up Paul’s aspirations for the church.

Paul concludes these admonitions with a blessing, “and the God of love and peace will be with you.” This blessing is similar to one Jesus commanded his disciples to use when they went out on their tour of Israel: “When you enter a house, first say, ‘Peace to this house.’ If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you” (Luke 10:5–6; see Matt 10:12–13). The phrase “God of love” appears only here in the New Testament. “The God of peace” is frequent (Rom 15:33; 16:20; 1 Cor 14:33; Phil 4:9; and 1 Thess 5:23). God shows inconceivable love to humans and makes peace through an incredible sacrifice (Rom 5:1; Eph 2:14–18).