

# Constructive Criticism

Matthew 7:1-6

May 5, 2019

The sermon title today is “Constructive Criticism.”<sup>1</sup> At first glance, these two words don’t seem to fit together very well: **Constructive** makes us think of something that builds us up and encourages us. But **Criticism** makes us think of something that tears us down or points out our flaws. So, why do we put these 2 words together? The reason is that constructive criticism is intended to synergize these two ideas into something even better, something very beneficial to human beings. As we tear down the bad things, we also build up the good things. It’s a simple enough concept, but oftentimes... we don’t do it very well. Either because the person offering the constructive criticism goes about it the wrong way, or because the person receiving the constructive criticism isn’t really wanting to receive it. Despite these challenges, constructive criticism is still a much-needed tool for our spiritual growth and development. Perhaps a more biblical word for “constructive criticism” would be exhortation. Synonyms for exhortation include: “admonishing, urging, persuading, prodding, beseeching, or warning.”<sup>3</sup> ***In order to achieve Christian maturity, we need to exhort one another with humility and integrity.*** So, how about you and me? Are we open to exhortation from other believers? Or, do we resist it? And are we open to our role of exhorting someone else? As brother and sisters in Christ, do we know each other, and love each other well enough, to exhort one another toward greater godliness? We’re going to talk about this as we look at Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 7. As we continue our study of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, we now enter into Matthew, chapter 7. We’re going to take a look at Jesus’ teaching about judging one another. In Matthew 7:1-2 Jesus begins, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”

**1. Exhortation requires humility.** Although Scripture does indeed call us to exhort one another, that does NOT mean that we should think that it calls us to sit in judgment on each other. Harsh judgment takes a posture of authority and sits over another person<sup>4</sup>, claiming competence to be in charge of them.<sup>5</sup> But God is the ultimate and final judge to whom all of us must answer, Christian and non-Christian alike. Jesus not only commands us NOT to be judgmental, but He also sternly reminds us that the way we judge other people is the way that God will judge us. This is not to say that God will mimic our judgmental attitude or immaturity, but rather that God will hold us accountable for the way we judge others. The stricter we are when we judge them, the more strictly that we will be judged.<sup>6</sup> Back in Matthew 5:7 Jesus taught us, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, we can choose to show mercy and receive mercy, or we can choose to be judgmental and receive judgment. Proper humility is the key here. As fellow sinners who will all answer to the same Holy God, we should know better than to judge others by taking on a critical spirit and a condemning attitude.<sup>8</sup> We are all saved by grace. Therefore, arrogant, self-righteousness judgment is out of place.<sup>10</sup> Not being judgmental does not mean that we shouldn’t practice good judgment. In other words, it’s not that Jesus is sanctioning us against using discernment of any kind. In fact, much to the opposite, “Judgment in the sense of analysis or discernment is always necessary” for us as Christ-followers.<sup>18</sup> About 10 verses later, in the very same chapter, Jesus teaches us in Matthew 7:15-20

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<sup>1</sup> I’m not sure why, but numbering of the footnotes got all messed up this time. Sorry about that.

<sup>3</sup> See Google.

<sup>4</sup> See Romans 14:4 and 1 Corinthians 4:1-5.

<sup>5</sup> See John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1978, p. 176.

<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, this reality sometimes causes us to apply this idea too broadly. We choose not to give or receive any kind of input at all. We reject any kind of feedback, constructive criticism, or coaching at all. Holding high the banner of “judge not lest you be judged,” we close ourselves off from all of the helpful input and advice that is desperately needed for our own spiritual growth and maturity. We suffer from arrested development spiritually and we fail to become complete in Christ.

<sup>7</sup> Consider also Matthew 6:14-15. “A judgmental attitude excludes us from God’s pardon, for it betrays an unbroken spirit.” D. A. Carson, *Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1987, pp. 131-133.

<sup>8</sup> D. A. Carson, *Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1987, p. 130.

<sup>10</sup> See Luke 18:9-14.

<sup>18</sup> “Verses 5-6 make it clear that Jesus’ followers must analyze situations and correct people when they err.” *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1942.

how to determine whether someone is a true or false prophet: by their fruit. We are told to discern whether it is good or bad.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps the reason that Jesus gives us this warning “not to judge” is that, as He approaches the end of His Sermon on the Mount, He sees our need for it. For those of us who are taking His message to heart, applying it to our lives, and beginning to enjoy its blessings, there is also a danger, that we will begin to judge those around us more harshly. In other words, as we begin to understand the greater righteousness that Jesus has been teaching us about, there may be an unintended side-affect. Gaining this new knowledge could incite our sinful nature to begin judging those around us, those who haven’t yet discovered it or figured it out.<sup>20</sup> We might think to ourselves, “Well, I know all about the Sermon on the Mount. Clearly other people don’t understand what righteousness is about. But I do. Other people just don’t get it.” And this can begin to build in us this pride and arrogance. Our human tendency to compare ourselves with others, may actually cause us to move backwards in our own spiritual maturity, as we begin to look down our noses in self-righteous contempt. Ironically, if you and I aren’t careful, after all of this wonderful instruction on the Greater Righteousness of Jesus’ Kingdom, we could find ourselves in lock-step with the Pharisees.

Jesus goes on in Matthew 7:3-4, “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?”

**2. Exhortation requires integrity.** The hyperbole here paints a rather amusing picture which drives home the silliness of our own hypocrisy. D.A. Carson points out that our human tendency is to focus “on certain public sins which others are prone to commit, and [we denounce] those sins with gusto, while remaining disturbingly oblivious to the sins which we ourselves are especially attracted” to.<sup>25</sup> It should go without saying that before any Christ-follower wades in to help a fellow believer, he/she must first address their own faults. We need to confront and confess our own sinful flaws before we start trying to poke around and prod into someone else’s business.<sup>26</sup>

I feel keenly attuned to Jesus’ illustration here because I have very poor vision. I wear contacts and they a very strong prescription. Without them, it would be very difficult for me to function. I certainly couldn’t drive legally. When I go to my annual eye exam my eye doctor often wants to do a glaucoma test. That’s the one where she puts some kind of purple laser thing right up next to my eye. She always warns me, “I need to get really close to your eye so HOLD STILL because I don’t actually want to touch your eye.” It’s freaky to let another human being get that close to the surface of your eye. It takes a lot of trust. Dr. Whelan is one of the only people I allow to get that close to my eye.<sup>28</sup> I certainly wouldn’t be too thrilled about it, if she walked into the exam room one day with a 2x4 stuck in her own eye. “Ok, Mr. Johnson, let’s have a nice close look to see if you have Glaucoma!”<sup>29</sup> No way! It goes without saying that Jesus’ hyperbole makes His point: If you are going to try to remove the spiritual speck from someone else’s eye, please MAKE SURE that you 1<sup>st</sup> remove the spiritual 2x4 from your own!



Any word of godly exhortation must begin with humble, honest self-assessment and then proceed with discerning, kind advice. And, proceed we must! Once we come to know/trust each other enough to do eye surgery, then we SHOULD help remove the speck! Jesus gives us a 2-step approach in Matthew 7:5, “You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

<sup>19</sup> Then, right after that, in Matthew 7:21-23, Jesus is pretty blunt that God will judge between true and false disciples, based on whether or not they have done God’s will or simply put on a show. See also Matthew 6:1-18.

<sup>20</sup> I remember failing in this way miserably my freshman year at the University of Northwestern St. Paul.

<sup>25</sup> D. A. Carson, *Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1987, p. 134.

<sup>26</sup> “It is evident that Jesus is not condemning criticism as such, but rather criticism of others when we exercise no comparable self-criticism.” John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1978, p. 179.

<sup>28</sup> Consider Zechariah 2:8, Psalm 17:8, and Proverbs 7:2.

<sup>29</sup> Most of us don’t like other people touching our eyes. When I was first learning to put my contacts in, other people would sometimes offer to do it for me. Nah ah! Not gonna happen. I don’t want someone else poking me in the eye!

**3. Exhortation brings blessing to brothers and sisters in Christ.** We do have a personal responsibility to bless one another and to care for one another through humble and integrity-filled exhortation. John Stott says it well: a speck in our bro/sis's eye "doesn't belong there. It is...usually painful and sometimes dangerous. To leave it there, and make no attempt to remove it, would hardly be consistent with brotherly love."<sup>32</sup> In fact, one of the most sincere motivations for getting ourselves healthy, for getting the plank out of our own eye, is so that we will be spiritually healthy enough to minister to others. There is always a danger in a sermon like this, that even as it reminds us of our opportunity and our Christian duty to exhort one another, it may also embolden some who are just looking for an excuse to be critical.<sup>33</sup> That is certainly not the intention today, as it would circle us right back to Jesus' words in v. 1, "do not judge." So, let's remind ourselves again: if we critically judge others, that is, in turn, how we can expect to be judged. This is precisely what Jesus warned us about in the beginning of this passage. Let's also note this: "Jesus does not anticipate that the Christian community will be perfect."<sup>34</sup> In fact, He assumes just the opposite. There may be times when we have a plank in our eye and there may be times when we have a speck in our eye.

But Jesus' message doesn't stop here. He goes on in Matthew 7:6 to say, "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces." This sounds a little harsh to our modern ears.<sup>40</sup> However, we shouldn't think that Jesus is being mean or insensitive here. Rather He is driving home His point by using yet another memorable object lesson that everyone there could relate to. Jesus makes His final point in a proverbial way. His original audience would have caught it right away. 2,000 years later, it's a little confusing to you and me. But that's ok, because it causes us to pause and think about it. At first, verse 6 seems out of place. How did we get on the topic of dogs and pigs anyway? Wasn't Jesus just teaching us about exhorting one another? Well yes, He was. And He still is. Only now he is cautioning us not to waste our words of exhortation on those who don't want to hear them.

**4. Exhortation toward Kingdom truth isn't well-received by everyone.** The dogs in Jesus' day were not the spoiled, well-fed pets that you and I enjoy today. In Jesus' day dogs lived on the street, more in line with what some of us have encountered in places like Bangladesh or Mexico. These are street-savvy dogs that fight and prowl and shouldn't be pet. Here is Jesus' point, you don't give street dogs something sacred. He makes the same point with pigs.<sup>41</sup> This translates into the year 2019 a little better. For most of us anyhow, pigs aren't pets. They wallow in the mud. They stink. The piglets are kind of cute and everybody likes to go see the big sow at the County Fair in August. But most of us wouldn't give a beautiful genuine pearl necklace to a pig.<sup>42</sup> That would be ridiculous, and wasteful. And that's the point that Jesus is making: Don't give pearls to pigs; they don't have the capacity to appreciate their value.

In this context, don't try to give this teaching from the Sermon on the Mount to people who don't have the capacity to appreciate it. Some people are not interested in our pearls of wisdom no matter how precious you & I know they are.<sup>43</sup> Sometimes, offering the Good News of the gospel and Jesus' kingdom, causes people to become enraged, and to turn on you and tear you to pieces. "Teaching about the kingdom should be given in accordance with the spiritual capacity of the learners."<sup>44</sup> To put this in more modern terms, doggedly resistant hearts and pig-headed stubbornness, can only be changed and transformed by a work of God.<sup>45</sup> What this means for you and me, is that once we have lovingly shared God's truth with someone, there's a point where we must recognize that some people's open rejection and hostility toward Christ is their own choice. We needn't feel any ongoing

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<sup>32</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1978, p. 179.

<sup>33</sup> See D. A. Carson, *Jesus's Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1987, p. 130.

<sup>34</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1978, p. 175.

<sup>40</sup> One might imagine that as Jesus was teaching this sermon that perhaps the sound of barking dogs could be heard or perhaps the smell of pigs was not too far off.

<sup>41</sup> See 2 Peter 2:22 regarding proverbs about dogs and sows.

<sup>42</sup> Consider Matthew 13:45-46.

<sup>43</sup> Consider the 2 groups in Matthew 7:13-20.

<sup>44</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1603.

<sup>45</sup> Consider Matthew 10:14 and Nehemiah 5:13

guilt once we've shared the message; we have fulfilled our responsibility.<sup>52</sup> So, we wait and we faithfully pray for their salvation but we probably shouldn't keep wasting our breath.<sup>53</sup> This is in line with what we read in places like Acts 13:44-46, "On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy. They began to contradict what Paul was saying and heaped abuse on him. Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles." The above said, our attitude toward the hardened lost, should be mitigated by a healthy reminder, that at one time, all of us were like dogs and pigs. We, likewise, did not understand the sacred and precious nature of Christ's Kingdom and the gospel message.<sup>54</sup>

Proverbs 9:7-9 summarizes well much of our message today: "Whoever corrects a mocker invites insults; whoever rebukes the wicked incurs abuse. Do not rebuke mockers or they will hate you; rebuke the wise and they will love you. Instruct the wise and they will be wiser still; teach the righteous and they will add to their learning."

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, let's not sit in judgment on one another. But let's also not fail to exhort and instruct one another in loving rebuke. Let's pursue Christian maturity together, as we practice mutual exhortation in all humility and integrity.

*This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji  
on May 5, 2019 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson*

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<sup>52</sup> Consider Matthew 12:30-32 and the Watchman in Ezekiel 33:7-9.

<sup>53</sup> Consider Acts 13:46, 18:5-6, and 28:24-28.

<sup>54</sup> See Ephesians 2:1-9.