

GOD'S LIBERATING LOVE—FREEDOM FROM JUDGING OTHERS AND BEING JUDGED

Galatians 4:12-20; 6:11-15

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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/freedom-from-judging-others-and-being-judged/>

Are you a person who has the bad habit of judging others, criticizing constantly? Would you like to be set free from that? Are you one who is enslaved to the approval and opinion of others? Do you need to be liberated from that? As we have seen from this Galatians series, God's love is liberating. His grace sets us free.

Paul was being criticized by the Judaizers, the ones insisting that new Christians keep Jewish laws in order to have their sins forgiven. They accused Paul of being liberal, not preaching the Bible (for them, the Torah, or our Old Testament). Because Paul preached that rules and good works can't save us, all they heard was, "Live any way you wish; grace is cheap." No, Paul says, it cost God everything. Summarizing, Paul says, "Good works do not produce salvation; salvation produces good works" (note how the fruit of Jesus grows within us, 5:22-23).

But the legalists who were hounding Paul didn't hear that. All they knew was that if people experienced freedom in Christ, they could no longer be controlled. I find Paul's descriptions of these fundamentalists and their efforts to control other people curiously up to date. "They want to shut you out of the free world of God's grace so that you will always depend on them for approval and direction, making them feel important" (4:17, *The Message*). Wow. Does this sound like the playground at school, or a slumber party, or adult cliques that form? Isolating others, making them dependent, maintaining our own power and importance.

Do we ever just stop to ask why we have hyper-critical spirits? Why we criticize and tear down others? Paul always starts with God's grace, with the Cross. Follow me. If I don't accept God's unconditional love for me, I can never forgive myself for being imperfect; if I can't forgive myself for being imperfect, then I can never forgive others for being imperfect.

Historians often describe the personality of Senator Joe McCarthy, who destroyed many lives with unfounded, wholesale smear tactics, accusing innocent people of Communist ties. He was extremely sensitive to criticism against himself, but brutally insensitive as he dished it out. You see, so often, the only time we can feel good about ourselves is when we are judging others. Think of the three court rooms from which we get approval of self: the courtroom of what others think of us, of what we think of ourselves (which isn't high if we let others dictate it) and of what God thinks of us. (which will be marred by the first two). Why not flip that on its head and begin with God's approval? And let that well of grace color what we think of ourselves and others?

Note how Paul deals with their criticism. 1) He has healthy boundaries and lovingly pushes back. He reminds them he had been sick when he visited them and of their loving hospitality toward him. Now, was he suddenly their enemy because he told them the truth? (4:16).

2) Paul learned from his critics. I believe God used Paul's critics to help him continually clarify the gospel message (the Jesus Way values the place of good works). We listen and learn, separating the wheat from the chaff [Brian McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, p. 189]. 3) Paul did not over-react. If we over-react and become defensive, we simply show we are also enslaved to others' approval and validation instead of to God's.

4) Paul continually focused on the Cross of Christ. When you are criticized, always remember our infinite worth to God. Though others may judge our mistakes or our actions, none of that touches our core value. We are valued and loved, period. So when the great God of heaven and earth affirms my worth, I can lovingly forgive the world for being wrong about me! Because of the Cross, because of God's great, liberating love, we are "set free from the stifling atmosphere of pleasing others and fitting into their little patterns..." (6:15).

Paul invested all his sense of worth in God's unconditional love for him, made known in the Cross (6:14-15). He knew that about 15 years before, a Nazarene peasant rabbi climbed a rugged hill, and as he was nailed to pieces of lumber, he cried out, "God loves you this much." And that sets us free!