

## "Common Criticism"

The setting is ancient Shiloh, the spiritual center for the ancient Hebrews. Once a year for some time now a man named Elkanah would come there to worship and offer sacrifices to God. He had a wife named Hannah whom he loved, but Hannah was unable to bear children. For Hebrews, infertility was looked upon as a disgrace, since Hebrews thought that you lived on through your male children. Perhaps that's why Elkanah took another wife, who bore him children.

The relationship between these two women was not a good one! 1 Samuel 1:6-7 says: "Because the LORD had closed Hannah's womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the LORD, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat."

This particular year it was a bad scene. Humiliated and upset, Hannah got up from a meal and walked into the house of the Lord, past old Eli the priest, sitting on a chair at the entrance to the tabernacle. Once inside, Hannah prays a heartfelt prayer, begging God to allow her to bear a son, and promising that if this happens she will dedicate this child wholly to the Lord. Something in particular catches Eli's attention as Hannah prays: "As she kept on praying to the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard" (verses 12-13a).

Most Hebrews would pray standing, with arms lifted up, praying *aloud*. This lady's mouth was moving, but there are no audible words coming out. Eli is suspicious! He concludes that *she's drunk!* The old priest can't let this slide by – a woman drunk in the house of the Lord! And he corrects her with not-so-nice words (hardly a counselor-like therapeutic response!). "Eli thought she was drunk and said to her, 'How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine'" (1 Samuel 1:13b-14). "It's not what you think," Hannah says: "Not so, my lord," Hannah replied, "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief"(verses 15-16).

With that, Eli's tone changes: "Eli answered, 'Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him'" (verse 17).

Isn't it easy to do what Eli did? To criticize someone without knowing all of the facts? To make a hasty judgment about somebody, and be wrong? Judging people and criticizing people is so much a part of life, isn't it? Neighbors, coworkers, family members put each other down. Voters criticize politicians. Students rag on their teachers. We make hasty judgments on people we first meet. Pastors find fault with parishioners, and church members find fault with their pastors.

The new pastor was preaching her first sermon. When the service was over she greeted the people as they were leaving. One man looked perturbed as he approached the new minister: "Reverend, your sermon was too long." Trying not to get defensive, the pastor said, "I appreciate your constructive criticism. Thank you." The complainer went on, however: "And you didn't speak loud enough." "Thank you for letting me know. I'll keep that in mind the next time I

preach," she rather meekly responded. "Also," the parishioner still went on, "you didn't say anything, either." By now, the subdued pastor just nodded in silence. The lady next in line, when she moved forward to the pastor, said, "I'm so embarrassed. That man is an absolute moron. He doesn't have an ounce of brains in his head. In fact, he never says anything except what he hears everyone else around him saying."

*Criticism* is a common thing, isn't it? But for the most part, it's not a *Christlike* thing. You remember Jesus' words, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For in the same way you judge other, you will be judged" (Matthew 7:1-2).

*But does this mean we make no moral judgments? That we never try to evaluate a person's character or integrity?* A young man was on a radio program talking very openly about a questionable lifestyle – even kind of flaunting that lifestyle. When someone called him on the carpet for this he quickly responded: "Judge not, that you be not judged!" A group of seminary professors were meeting. One of the instructors reported that at his school it seemed the worst thing someone could say about you is that you are "judgmental". The professor said, "You can't get a good argument going in class anymore. As soon as somebody takes a stand on any important issue, somebody else says that person is judgmental. And that's it – end of discussion. Everyone is intimidated." Many of the other professors nodded their heads in agreement.

Isn't it appropriate – and even necessary – at times to make honest judgments about a person or situation? If you loaned money to someone and they never paid it back, and they come to you again asking to borrow more money, wouldn't common sense tell you not to give them any more money? You're making a judgment on that individual. If you know someone who gossips about everyone, would you share any personal, confidential information with that person? You're judging that person. I had a situation in a church where a man in the community church was acting inappropriately toward young girls. He told someone that he was going to come to our church and do more of it. Our Administrative Board took immediate action to bar him from entering our church building. We were judging him.

Unless we're naïve, or downright foolish, we have to make judgments on people. Loving parents make judgments about their children. Skilled teachers make judgments about their students. Wise supervisors have to size up those workers whom they oversee. *We know this, don't we?*

But Jesus said, "Do not judge." Wait a minute! Didn't Jesus Himself make judgments about people? Jesus once referred to Herod as "that fox" (Luke 13:32). Read Matthew, chapter 23. Jesus has a long rant against the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. He scorches them, calling them "hypocrites", "blind guides", "blind fools". He says, "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" (Matthew 23:33).

So, what's with Jesus? Was He saying, "Don't *you* go judging people, but it's ok for *Me* to do it"? Was He being a hypocrite – saying "Don't judge", then doing just that? No, I don't think Jesus was contradicting Himself or being a hypocrite, nor ruling out the need to honestly evaluate people's character and behaviors.

Jesus knew how to accurately size up people! We read this about Jesus in John 2:23-25: "When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone." Jesus could size up people perfectly!

Here's another interesting Scripture that relates to this: Jesus said, "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment" (John 7:24). i.e. Look beneath the surface. Don't make hasty, uninformed judgments about people. When Jesus said, "Do not judge", I don't think He was forbidding the careful, cautious, measured evaluation of a person. *Rather, I believe He was condemning that super critical attitude that quickly criticizes people, especially without knowing the truth about a person, or all of the facts that may be involved.*

The priest Eli was sure that Hannah was drunk, and so he scolded her and wanted to straighten her out! He didn't even realize she was *praying!* *Isn't that like us – quick to judge, without understanding what's really going on!*

I was preaching a sermon on being a Christian at work. I kind of joked about hard-headed bosses. I mentioned that I had read about a company that required employees to show a copy of the obituary if they were asking for time off to attend a family member's funeral service. Ha! Isn't that awful! Well, after the service, one of the church members who ran a business said *they* require that in their company. So many employees were taking time off when there was actually no death. I felt embarrassed. I had criticized, and didn't know what I was talking about.

Illust. Steven Covey, in his popular book, *Seven Habits For Highly Effective People*, tells of the man riding a bus, and becoming very annoyed at a little boy running up and down the aisle of the bus screaming and laughing at the top of his lungs, while the boy's dad just sat there and did nothing. He glared at the boy's father, noticing his hair was unkept, his eyes bloodshot – thinking the man was an alcoholic. Finally, he couldn't take it any longer. He approached the dad and angrily told him to take control of his son. The father seemed to be shaken from a trance, and apologized to the bus rider, and told him that his wife, this little boy's mom, had just died at the hospital after struggling all night, and he was trying to think of a way to break the news to the boy.

*Isn't this how it is so often – we make hasty judgments about people, or situations, and have no clue as to all the facts.* We pastors are easy targets for criticism. Many times over the years I've been criticized for decisions made in the church, and people had no clue of all the factors involved. I've been accused of all kinds of things that simply weren't true.

But I guess Christian pastors aren't the only ones who bear the brunt of criticism! Robert Alper is a Jewish rabbi, and a comedian. He tells about a synagogue that uses voicemail. Alper phoned and heard this message: "Welcome to Temple Beth Shalom. If you're calling from a touch-tone phone and would like membership information, press 1. For our service schedule, press 2. To complain to the rabbi, press 3. To complain about the rabbi, press 4, 5, or 6."

But we pastors and priests and rabbis can often be quick to criticize people in our churches and synagogues, without understanding all they're going through in their families, their jobs, or their personal struggles.

Think what a different world it would be if we stopped criticizing each other so much! Families would be happier. Work places would be less stressful. Politicians could get a lot more done for the good of the country. *Facebook* would be a more positive social media without the critical political postings that only serve to reinforce prejudices and stir up angry responses

*Church life* would be more pleasant, and the church's witness for our Lord would be more effective, if we spent less time criticizing one another and more time encouraging and affirming each other. James 4:11-12 is a word to those of us in the church: "Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?"

Old Eli thought this woman Hannah had come to the religious shrine, and gotten drunk. Quick to jump to conclusions, he judged her. He didn't have a clue as to what was really going on – that she was *praying*.

A man from Peoria, Arizona wrote this letter to the editor of the Arizona Republic newspaper. "Question of the day for Luke Air Force Base: Whom do we thank for the morning air show? Last Wednesday, at precisely 9:11 a.m. a tight formation of four F-16 jets made a low pass over Arrowhead Mall, continuing west over Bell Road at approximately 500 feet. Imagine our good fortune! Do the Tom Cruise-wannabes feel we need this wake-up call, or were they trying to impress the cashiers at Mervyns' early-bird special? Any response would be appreciated." (Signed) Tom MacRae, Peoria

This letter of response was printed in the paper: "On June 15, at precisely 9:12 a.m. a perfectly timed four-ship of F-16's from the 63rd Flight Squadron at Luke Air Force Base flew over the grave of Capt. Jeremy Fresques. Capt. Fresques was an Air Force officer who was previously stationed at Luke Air Force Base and was killed in Iraq on May 30, Memorial Day. At 9 a.m. on June 15, his family and friends gathered at Sunland Memorial Park in Sun City to mourn the loss of a husband, son and friend.

"Based on the letter writer's recount of the flyby, and because of the jet noise, I'm sure you didn't hear the 21-gun salute, the playing of taps, or my words to the widow and parents of Capt. Fresques as I gave them their son's flag on behalf of the President of the United States and all those veterans and servicemen and women who understand the sacrifices they have endured. A four-ship flyby is a display of respect the Air Force pays to those who give their lives in defense of freedom. We are professional aviators and take our jobs seriously, and on June 15 what the letter writer witnesses was four officers lining up to pay their ultimate respects.

"The letter writer asks, 'Whom do we thank for the morning air show?' The 56<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing will call you, and forward your thanks to the widow and parents of Capt. Freques, and thank them for you, for it was in their honor that my pilots flew the most honorable formation of their lives." (Signed) Lt. Col Scott Pleus (commander of 63<sup>rd</sup> Fight Squadron, Luke Air Force Base

This follow up letter was sent to the newspaper from the original writer: "I read with increasing embarrassment and humility the response to my unfortunate letter to *The Republic* concerning an Air Force flyby. I had no idea of the significance of the flyby, and would never have insulted such a fine and respectful display had I known.

"I have received many calls from the fine airmen who are serving or have served at Luke, and I have attempted to explain my side and apologized for any discomfort my letter has caused. This was simply an uninformed citizen complaining about noise".

"I have been called un-American by an unknown caller and I feel that I must address that. I served in the U.S. Navy and am a Vietnam veteran. I love my country and respect the jobs that the service organizations are doing. Please accept my heartfelt apologies."

(Signed) Tom MacRae

*For heaven's sake, can we stop criticizing one another so much!*

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.  
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