



2 Corinthians 12:11-21

Pointing the finger. It's a term we use a lot when we blame somebody for something wrong that has happened. It was his fault, it was her fault. And we judge others. Some people are persistent finger-pointers, finding fault in almost everyone they meet.

Finger-pointing can be very unhelpful – it's all YOUR fault! You don't have to go far in politics to find finger pointing. There are the politicians in the house of Commons, posturing, pointing the finger – one person trying to get the better of the other. But does it help? In fact finger pointing too often obscures the truth rather than exposes it.

People who point the finger at others, judging them, gossiping about them can be a very destructive force in a church. It was being a destructive force in Corinth, dividing the church over the issue of Paul's authority. What was being said just wasn't true and Paul needed to address it.

I talked briefly about Titanic this morning. At the time the finger got well and truly pointed at the Captain who went down with his ship, but actually, with the knowledge gained from the wreck we now know that the accident was an unfortunate mixture of systematic complacency by Harland and Wolff, White Star and the government, and a general lack of understanding of how the ship's structure would behave should it strike an object side on in sub-zero conditions. It had never happened before to that size of ship, how could they have known?

Someone once said that when you make snap judgements on people and point the finger, you point three back at yourself! Everyone who I've ever known who has a judgemental spirit has been someone who failed to understand the person they were criticising or the circumstances they were in. Usually the criticism says more about their heart than who they are pointing the finger at. I'd even go as far as to say that just about every judgemental person I have ever known had significant sin in their lives that had never been dealt with – usually unforgiven sin.

In 2 Corinthians 12 we see Paul finishing off a long section of the letter dealing with the wreckage that false teachers had brought to the church. Paul spent some time in this letter dealing with the criticisms of these people and in contrasting his ministry with theirs, exposed them for the self-serving people that they were.

Because these people were not of the church and were destructive to it, he certainly does not mince his words in regard to them as we found in previous sermons. He exposed them for the charlatans they were. In similar matters, I believe we should be equally as uncompromising with those who lead God's people away from truth.

However, there were another set of people that were pointing the finger at Paul. These were Christians who had been deceived by the false teachers and were questioning his authority as an apostle, his personal integrity in relation to money. These weren't outsiders, but God's people. How did he deal with them?

Well, he had to correct them in the judgement they were making on him but how did he do that without being a finger-pointer himself? After all, the aim was to win them over/back rather than see them off with the false teachers. I'd suggest Paul did this in a number of ways. They are all questions we could ask of ourselves when we find ourselves pointing our fingers at others or facing the criticism of people pointing the finger at us.

– *by showing what God was doing*

The key criticism of Paul was over his authority as an apostle. The most significant evidence of his authority was the way the God worked through him. *For even if I am nothing, I am in no way inferior to those very special "apostles" of yours. 12 The many miracles and wonders that prove that I am an apostle were performed among you with much patience.* The “super apostles were less than zero to Paul. Why? Because God was in his ministry and that was shown by signs and wonders. It should have been obvious to the Corinthians and beyond refute.

Whenever we feel tempted to criticise others for the way they act, or to judge Christians of other traditions or similar, then ask ourselves “where's God in all this?”

– *by speaking as Christ would have us speak*

Paul was quite emphatic about the reason he was writing to them: *19 Perhaps you think that all along we have been trying to defend ourselves before you. No! We speak as Christ would have us speak in the presence of God, and everything we do, dear friends, is done to help you.* He was speaking to them as Christ would have them speak in the presence of God.

When we talk about others or talk to others, how should we speak. We should speak as though we were in the presence of God. Why? Because if God were standing next to us when we were saying things about people, would what we say be different? Well, He is with us! If our words aren't fit enough for God then they aren't fit for anyone else either!

– *by having transparent motives*

The most important thing that's necessary when dealing with people who criticise us is to be of clear conscience. Transparency in everything usually stops finger pointing and gossip. It at least clears our conscience but as Paul finds here, his financial transparency resulted in his critics reading sinister motives into his desire not to be a burden to them. I've got to say, once some people get bees in their bonnets, they hang on to things even if they are shown to be false. *16 You will agree, then, that I was not a burden to you. But someone will say that I was tricky, and trapped you with lies. 17 How? Did I take advantage of you through any of the messengers I sent? 18 I begged Titus to go, and I sent the other believer with him. Would you say that Titus took advantage of you?* How could he have done things at Corinth out of financial motives when he did not take money from them for his upkeep, and the only money he did arrange from them was for giving to Judea which was supervised by “the other disciple” who they knew and trusted!

– *by showing love*

In the end, Paul's desire was as a parent to a child; to deal with this situation so that it might benefit them, because he loved them. *15 I will be glad to spend all I have, and myself as well, in order to help you. Will you love me less because I love you so much?* And *19 Perhaps you think that all along we have been trying to defend ourselves before you. No! We speak as Christ would have us speak in the presence of God, and everything we do, dear friends, is done to help you.* Dealing with criticism can only be done as regards our fellow believers in love: putting their needs above others. It's one of the most difficult things to do if people say outrageous things. But as Jesus says in Matthew 18, when our brother (or sister) offends us then our first interest is to win them back. That's why there is a whole procedure there to win people back. What a pity that so few believers use it! The love motive is what makes believers and churches mature and grow. Ephesians 4:14 *Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.* Speaking the truth in love stops the kind of nonsense Paul had to face in Corinth and is the same key to dealing with the same things today.

- *by being constructive rather than destructive*

Finally, Paul's approach was to be constructive. He was there to help, not humiliate. He could have said "I'm coming soon so chuck these silly people out ASAP before I get very angry with them" At the root of finger pointing there was the three fingers pointing back. People were getting holier than thou about Paul, but there were clearly sin in their lives unresolved that were causing them to make compromises with their faith. That's what Christians do when they have the inconvenient truth of sin to deal with – they massage it out in some way. Paul says *20 I am afraid that when I get there I will find you different from what I would like you to be and you will find me different from what you would like me to be. I am afraid that I will find quarrelling and jealousy, hot tempers and selfishness, insults and gossip, pride and disorder. 21 I am afraid that the next time I come my God will humiliate me in your presence, and I shall weep over many who sinned in the past and have not repented of the immoral things they have done--their lust and their sexual sins.* Paul is constructive here. He does not say "sinners repent" but appeals to them on the basis of the humiliation it will be to him if he finds things to not be in order. He has switched the focus from him to them, not in an accusing way, but in a manner that allows them to face up to their issues before he comes.

I'll follow on with the final part of the series on 2 Corinthians next time. This has been a passage that had focussed on the need to measure our words and motives when dealing with those who point the finger at others or maybe us in the church. For us, it should be a matter of godly motives and words spoken with care.

I was fascinated to find this secular article by a life coach about dealing with finger pointing in a management situation. He could have got it out of the Bible – and probably did.

Harvard Business Review: Marshall Goldsmith: 7 Steps to Stop Finger-Pointing in a Crisis

1. **Encourage everyone on your team to remember four words** that can help all of you get through your crisis in the best way possible: help more, judge less.
2. **Try to get team members to focus on a future that they can impact**, not a past that they cannot change anyway.
3. **Try to get people to take responsibility for their own behaviour.** Sometimes it is easier to see our own mistakes in other people than in the mirror. We may not be able to change what other people have done, but we can certainly change ourselves.
4. **Ask each person to reflect on the question, "What can I learn from this crisis?"** Anyone can provide leadership when times are easy. Great leaders - and great teams - step up when times are tough. Rather than get lost in whining, have each team member focus on how he or she can grow from this experience.
5. **Ask everyone on your team to reflect on the question, "What can we learn from this crisis?"** After each person's individual reflection, encourage your team to engage in collection reflection.
6. **Encourage each team member to avoid speaking when angry or out of control.**
 7. **Before speaking don't just ask, "Am I correct?" - ask "Will this help?"** Just because we believe that something is true, we don't have to say it. If our comment may be hurtful to individuals or destructive to teamwork, it can sometimes just be left unsaid.

Prayer

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