

# Christians Coping With Criticism

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] open it up to 1 Corinthians chapter 4. I'm going to cover verses 1 to verse 5, but I will be moving around a little bit. It's always good for you to check and to see what the preacher is saying from the Bible itself. My title is Christians Coping with Criticism. That's what we're going to do today. We're going to look at how Paul was criticized as a minister, and we're going to try and apply some of the lessons that he teaches us about responding to criticism. We're going to look at some of those lessons and apply those to our lives. So it's quite a practical topic today, and you might ask, well, why this kind of sermon at this time? Well, I know that some of us are probably under fire. Some of us are receiving criticism for our Christian faith, and we're living in a critical age. We're living in a very, very critical age where I'm sure you'll notice that a lot of people are very critical of everything. I find it even amongst our students.

We're living in a cynical age. We're living in an age where people will often build a career, make money, build a livelihood on the back of criticizing other people. And for many of us who are Christians, we are on the receiving end. Now, there are all different kinds of criticism that one can discuss.

I'm not looking at any kind of criticism today. I'm going to be looking at the kind of criticism that Christians receive because of their faith. That's the kind of criticism that Paul received, and often that is the kind of criticism that we receive today. Many of us, I'm sure, in the service are feeling criticism and are on the receiving end of criticism, maybe from people in the church who are not Christians, who you meet with a church who are critical of you, or maybe people out there in the workplace, people who are not of the Christian faith, maybe Muslims, who can often be very critical of Christians, or maybe even people in your own family who are critical of you, not in general, but because of the fact that you call yourself a Christian.

And I think our COVID age has produced more people who are critical, particularly folk who don't have a sense of eternity, don't have a sense of resting in the arms of the Lord Jesus Christ. Many people like that are uncertain, insecure, and as a result, often become very, very critical of Christians.

And again, some of them might be in your family, some of them might be in the workplace, even in the church, believe it or not. And we're going to be looking at that topic today, and hence my title.

[ 2 : 3 7 ] But again, as I begin, I want to make it very clear that good and positive criticism is a helpful thing. I'm not saying that all kinds of criticism are bad. There is good criticism, there is positive criticism, and that can be of great value to the life of a Christian. I'm not suggesting today that you must just cut yourself out from all forms of criticism, not at all. But again, I'm going to be focusing this morning on Christians dealing with unhelpful criticism. That's what Paul had to deal with as he wrote this letter to the Corinthians. We're looking at unnecessarily critical, unhelpful, unwarranted, negative input from people. And we're going to look at the passage, and we're going to see that Paul himself came under this kind of criticism as well. Now, if you open the Bible, and you've got the Bible in front of you, you'll see that 1 Corinthians is called 1 Corinthians. You might ask, what does that mean? I've always wanted to know what 1 Corinthians means, or what does 2 Corinthians mean, or what does

Ephesians mean? Well, it's just a title given to a letter, a letter written by the Apostle Paul to a congregation in this particular case, around about halfway through the first century. So it's around about 30 or so years, maybe 25 years after Jesus died. And it's the first letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthian church. We actually know that he wrote four, but we've only got two in God's providence in the Bible. Paul came to Corinth, and he planted the church there in the second missionary journey that he had. Stayed there about 18 months, maybe a bit longer. Then he left, went back to his sending church, and then in the third missionary journey, sometime later, a couple of years later, but more than that, came back into the general area, settled at Ephesus, and started building a church there in Ephesus. It was a few hundred miles away from Corinth. And the Corinthians were having a lot of problems. As we're going to see, they were a problem church. They had a lot of issues. And they heard that Paul was in the general area, and they had a lot of questions that they wanted to ask him, and they were quite critical as well.

And so they sent him a delegation, and they sent him a letter. And 1 Corinthians is really Paul trying to deal with all of these issues, and in many ways trying to put out all the fires. And there were a lot of fires at Corinth, because if you look at the letter, you'll see that Paul is dealing with all kinds of really bad issues. For example, the church was divided over a lot of things. They were fighting over a lot of things. Some of the Corinthians had formed little factions against each other over what leader to follow. Some were following Paul. Some followed another pastor who worked at Corinth called Apollos. Others were saying, no, we won't follow them. We only follow Christ. Some were saying, we follow Peter, because Peter had become well known. And in other cases, there were problems in the marriages in chapter 7. A lot of the marriages at Corinth were breaking down. There was a lot of conflict in the church. Some Christians were actually becoming offended so quickly at their own brothers and sisters who were taking them to court in 1 Corinthians chapter 6. There was even conflict when they celebrated the Lord's Supper. Then they were confused about the resurrection in chapter 15. So it goes on.

There's a lot of problems at Corinth. There was even prostitution, apparently. And Paul has got to try and deal with these issues. He doesn't have Zoom. He can't give him a Zoom code and say, we'll be Zooming on Sunday morning. He's got to write a letter and he's got to deal with a lot of these things just in a letter. And that's what he's doing here. And one of the problems they had was that they were not only very, very, very immature, but in a certain sense, there was also a problem because they were gifted. Now, don't get me wrong. It's not wrong to be gifted as a Christian.

It's not wrong to have God giving you a lot of gifts. That's a wonderful thing. But in general, what you discover in life is that often very talented, clever, gifted people are also very arrogant. You ever notice that? I was saying in the 830 service that even our students, we see this kind of tendency. Some of our students, not all, but some students who are very, very clever, we've got to sort of shrink their heads down a little bit because they think they know everything. But at Corinth, it was really a big problem. And that is often the case. It's very difficult to minister to highly gifted people occasionally. I'm not saying that all gifted people are problems. I mean, Alan Hodgson is very gifted and he's a wonderfully humble man.

[ 7 : 08 ] Just joking. But joking aside, it is sometimes very, very difficult. You get gifted people who think they know everything. They've got heads the size of Cape Town. And Paul was actually finding it almost impossible to pastor these people because they literally felt they knew everything.

That's why when Alan read out, he read out Paul saying, you already have become kings. By the way, if you don't believe, Paul can be sarcastic. Just go home and read chapter 4. Already you have all you want? He says, wow, already you've become kings. But there's something funny going on here because I'm your apostle. I'm your teacher. Why ain't I a king? I'm not a king, but you're a king. You have everything you want. You have all the riches in the world. Why am I still struggling? So in other words, Paul is using sarcasm and a bit of humor to try and say to these guys, listen, this arrogance has got to come to an end. Listen to this, 1 Corinthians 4 and verse 7. For who makes you different?

Now, why does he say that? Well, I believe the reason is because that's exactly what they felt about themselves. I think they felt that they were different, that they were better than everybody else, that they were special. So Paul writes and he says, and sometimes it's helpful, you know, when you read Paul's letters, to read through the letter, to read through the text, and you get a picture of what was going on at the time. You actually get a picture of the problems. And you can ask yourself, well, why did Paul write this? Why did Paul write this at this time? Why does he say, for who makes you different from anybody else? Well, it's because that's what they thought, you see. They thought that they were better than everybody else. What do you have, he goes on, that you did not receive? Very powerful, powerful criticism. Ouch. And if you did not receive it, why do you boast? As though you did not. So giftedness, being talented doesn't necessarily mean maturity. It doesn't necessarily mean graciousness and humility. Sometimes, as I say, talented people can be very, very difficult to pastor. I've experienced that in the years.

So, with all of this in mind, what kind of criticisms do gospel-centered people receive when they're in some kind of ministry or not? So, in other words, I'm dealing with a particular kind of criticism. It's the kind of criticism that comes our way because we're Christians, whether we're full-time in ministry or whether we're not. Whether we are simply reaching out, wanting to reach out for Jesus in the workplace, we want to reach out for the Lord in the family, and we come under fire. I'm dealing with a particular kind of criticism. It's the kind of criticism that we get because we're Christians, because we want to be Christians. We're rubbing up against critical people in the workplace. That is what we are looking at. Now, before I look at the passage and Paul's response to criticism in some detail, let's first of all get a feel for the type of criticism that he received from the Corinthians, because I think that the type of criticism that he received we get on occasion. As Nick said when we were having tea after the earlier service, that's why 1 Corinthians got in the Bible, because God knows in his providence that Paul's advice has relevance for all churches and all people and all Christians of all time, because we ourselves are going to come under the same kind of criticism. Now, there are two types of criticism that I want to highlight that Paul had to suffer, and that we suffer from time to time. Number one, a criticism of gospel content. In other words, what it was that Paul believed. And then secondly, a criticism of gospel application, how he lived out what he believed. Those are the two types of criticism that Paul had to deal with. So let's look at the first type, and that is a criticism regarding the content, the heart of what he believed as a Christian. What was that? What should it be? And that is the cross of Jesus Christ, and what the cross gives us. So look at 1 Corinthians 1 from verse 21 to verse 23. Why does he write this?

I'm going to read it out to you in a second, but why? Why does he write this? What is he responding to on the part of the Corinthians? So let me read it out to you. He says, Now that is very hard hitting for the Corinthians because they loved worldly wisdom. God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. And here you'll pick up on Paul responding to the critical attitudes of his age. Jews demand miraculous signs. Greeks look for wisdom.

[ 11 : 55 ] But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. In other words, like our age today, Paul's age was critical of the cross of Jesus Christ.

I've often found that. I've sometimes found that even in a conversation, if I'm in a conversation with people who are not Christians. You can talk about anything you want. You know, you can talk about motor cars, you can talk about rugby, you can even talk about religion. But if you start talking about Jesus Christ and the cross, people get embarrassed. But I think the point is here that cross-centered living at some stage in your life, if you are a true Christian, will come under fire from not only the world, but here, even the church. Remember, the Corinthians were people who went to church.

I don't think all of them understood the gospel. So true Christians always should put the cross, the contents of what the cross means, the crucifixion of Jesus for sin, at the center of everything they believe. And of course, as we're going to see, everything they do. But despite being churchgoers, incredibly, the Corinthians' view of the cross was at the heart of their problem with Paul.

This is by far the most important criticism I think that Paul received from them. As I said in the earlier service, if you read and you know the first letter, and in a sense, the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians, you will see that the cross, in some way or the other, is foundational to all of their problems in the church. They had a problem with the cross. Now, I don't think that they rejected the cross entirely. The devil is more subtle than that.

It wasn't as if they were saying, we don't want the cross in this church. I think what they were saying is that why do you stress it so much? I've come under that kind of fire over the years.

[ 14 : 01 ] Over the years, I've had people come and say, you know, you stress the cross too much in this church. We're going to go to another church. It's fine to stress the cross every now and again, but Paul, you're doing it too much. Why must the cross be at the heart of everything? It's at the heart of the choruses. It's the heart of the services that we run here at St. Mark's. Is that not the case?

I wonder whether you felt a bit cynical, a bit critical about the cross. Well, the Corinthians felt that it was far too central, and they somehow felt that Paul's ministry, because it was so centered on the cross, was somehow inadequate. It could have been better.

It's almost as if they were saying, can't we graduate beyond the cross? The cross is for baby Christians. Let's graduate from the cross, and let's go to post-grad Christianity, as we would say at the college. Let's go to a higher Christianity and pursue something else. And of course, when the cross is no longer at the center of a church's ministry, then that church is going to wander away and look for something else. And that is exactly what was happening at Corinth, and that's why they had all of these problems, you see. So Paul is coming under fire because of the content of what he believes at the center of his life, at the center of who he is, is the cross of Jesus Christ.

And he's being criticized for that. And we can see when we read the passage in 1 Corinthians 4 and earlier on, that they were not only critical of the fact that he believed all of that stuff, but they were critical of the fact that he was always talking about it. He was always pushing it. He was always talking about Jesus. He was always preaching about the cross, all the time. He refused to preach about any other Jesus, only the Jesus of the cross. You know, that would amaze me about Bishop Frank Retief, who was such a great evangelist. I remember, I've known him for many, many years, that even when you take him to a restaurant, if he gets the chance to talk about Jesus and the cross, he'll do so.

He's never rude or overbearing, but he always takes that opportunity. I think Paul was the same thing. But they were saying, Paul, does it have to be at the center of everything in your ministry?

[16:12] We don't mind a bit of the cross. Just don't make it at the center of everything. So the first kind of criticism is the kind of criticism that comes to a Christian who believes in the content and the message of the cross of Jesus Christ, the meaning of his death and his resurrection for sin. Now, the second type of criticism that we receive and that Paul received flows from the first, and that is a criticism of gospel application and living. Because if the cross is at the center of your life, then you're going to live it out, aren't you? You're going to live the cross out in a certain way. And it, of course, was so visible in Paul's life and in his preaching. And of course, if people don't like your gospel content, if you are a gospel person and the cross is at the center of what you believe, they're not going to like your life. They're not going to like certain stances that you take in your life. They're not going to like your gospel application, in other words, the way you live, because the one is always going to inform the other.

So in 1 Corinthians 2, from verse 1 to verse 4, this is a very interesting passage, and it helps us to see how Paul, again, is responding to a very, very, very immature, critical attitude that they had towards him as a Christian man. And again, I'm going to read it out to you. And what I want you to do is just read it, read it with me in your heart, follow in your mind, and try and figure out what he's responding to. Let me read it out to you. When I came to you, brothers, he writes. Now, remember, the Corinthians loved to show off. I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and in fear and with much trembling. Now, in ancient Greece, you, you know, cowboys don't cry. So that's not going to endear him to the Corinthians.

Look at all the Greek statues out there. You know, the Greek art, Greek statues, I was saying at the earlier service. You know, you might look like a Greek statue until you hit, what, 25? For those of us who are really lucky, 35, after that, it's downhill. Okay? They were into, they were like Hollywood, you see? And so when Paul says, well, I came to you, my message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power. Now, I was chatting to Nick a little bit earlier on, and we were saying that, you know, sometimes if you really want to understand the Bible, you need to know the culture, the culture of the background, you know? Now, in ancient Greece, as I said earlier, they didn't have any YouTube. It's amazing how many people have got YouTube channels. My colleague in the ministry, Reverend Grant Ratiff, who's just taken up our church out in Sinenbosch, he's got a 13-year-old son, Levi, who's got his own channel. I don't know how many hundred hits, doing art. It's amazing. We've got so many powerful ways of communicating to each other and entertaining with a nun. But in the ancient world, there was no YouTube, there was no Zoom, there was no social media. So what did you do on a Friday night as a family if you wanted to be entertained? Well, you would go to the local Colosseum if you lived in a fairly large Greek city, and the way often the Greeks would entertain themselves is that they would invite a famous speaker to come and speak. And in the ancient Greek world, if you wanted to be famous as a speech writer and a speech giver, you had to be very, very, very, very skilled and rhetorical in the way you presented your argument. You had to be a real whiz kid up in the pulpit. It was all about not so much the content. It was all about the flash. It was all about the delivery. It was all about the appearances.

You could speak about anything. And scholars tell us that you'd have a famous teacher, you'd have to pay him a lot of this, a lot of money. And he'd come and he'd expect to be put up in the homes of one of the richest citizens of the city. And then on a Friday night, he would just hold forth. He would talk, first of all, for example, about thunderstorms and lightnings. He would talk about being in a thunderstorm, for example. And he would describe with such power, with such rhetorical brilliance, the reality of being in a thunderstorm and how we respond to the thunder and the lightning. It was almost as if he conjured up a thunderstorm right there in front of them. And then they would be terrified and cowering under their seats. And then two minutes later, he would just switch and he'd talk about something else. He'd crack a joke and everybody would be laughing, simply on the basis of his outer eloquence, his professional skill, using anecdotes and illustrations and the rhetorical techniques of the day that everybody admired. These guys were the Angelina Jolie's and the Brad Pitt's of the day.

These were the Hollywood stars. And it was all about how they dressed and how eloquent they were. That is how you persuaded people. It wasn't so much about the content. I find that very much true in the 21st century. The people today, they don't care what you believe in. What they're impressed with is outer show of glamour and wealth and success. That's what people are worried about. They want to know whether or not you're successful, whether you live on the right side of the railway line, whether you drive the right car, whether your kids go to the right schools, whether you've got the right amount of money, whether you look good. I mean, people are obsessed with looks, aren't they, today? Now, that's exactly what Paul is combating in the first century. Because the Corinthians were not so rarely all that interested in the content at the end of the day if the content didn't make them rich, make them flashy, outwardly impressive. So in 2 Corinthians 10 verse 10, Paul comments on his critics. And he says this, for some say, speaking about him, by the way, for some say his letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he's unimpressive and he's speaking amounts to nothing. In other words, he's not outwardly impressive enough. I think that the Corinthians expected Paul to be one of these entertainers. I think that when Paul came to Corinth, they said, we want a preacher, but we want more than a preacher, we want an entertainer. We want somebody who can take us off into delusions of grandeur and raptures of joy. Paul says, when I came, I refused to go down that road. I'm not going to persuade you by flash and by the car that I drive, by the contents, the gospel that I preach. And he was criticized for that because at Corinth, it was all about being outwardly impressive.

[ 22 : 54 ] Paul, why aren't you a CEO from a company? Why aren't you flashy enough? Why aren't you rich enough? And you're always talking about your problems. I don't know if you've read Paul's letters, but he's always talking about his problems. And can't you give us somebody else? You're always going on about how you've been persecuted and shipwrecked. The first few lines of 2 Corinthians, go home and read the first two lines of 2 Corinthians. There Paul is going on about, he suffered so much in the province of Asia, he almost gave up living. The Corinthians are saying that this is a bit too much.

You're not impressive enough. And I think that even today, Christians can come under incredible pressure when the world out there doesn't see the same kind of wealth and fruit that they want.

especially with immature people who don't understand the gospel, who don't understand the dynamics of the Christian life. And I think that Paul being sensitive like us was very much impacted by the negative criticism of the Corinthians. I think that they hurt him very, very deeply. So how do we deal now in the few minutes we have left? How do we deal with this? How do we deal with unkind, unwarranted criticism of our faith, remember, and living out our faith? Well, wisdom is needed a lot of the time. You know, sometimes, as the proverb says, don't answer the fool in his folly.

You know, sometimes you just ignore it. But there are other occasions where the same proverb says a little bit later, answer the fool in his folly. So which one is it? Well, you've got to think through the circumstances and you've got to ask God for wisdom. But sometimes, as difficult as it is, for the sake of the gospel, you've got to give a reply. Let's see how Paul replies. And Paul is going to give us this morning two bits of advice. The first bit of advice is simply know who you ultimately answer to verses one to verse two. It was read out a bit earlier, but it is so important.

Every morning, if you want to be a Christian, you've got to wake up and you've got to make a fundamental decision. So must I, and that is, what kind of a man or a woman am I going to be? Am I going to be a man of God or am I going to be a man of the unbelieving secular world out there?

[ 25 : 08 ] Am I going to go for gospel principles today in the workplace or am I going to go for the principles of the world? The superficial, superficial principles and glamour of the world that ultimately do not fill the soul. Every day, we've got to make that decision. What kind of a man, what kind of a woman am I going to be? And maybe you've been criticized out there. Many of us, I know, are criticized in the workplace. It's easy to fall into temptation, isn't it? And to be impressed by the wealth of the world and the power of the world. The world always seems to have the most wealth and the most power.

Sometimes it's difficult to say, Lord, I will not be tempted by the prosperity of the wicked and I will follow Jesus and I will follow the cross today.

So Paul's point here, as he explains his own attitude to the Corinthians, is that at the end of the day, he answers to Jesus Christ, he's not going to be a man or the woman of the Corinthian marketplace. In the way that he ministers to people, in the things that he believes and the principles that he lives by. So we're going to be effective for the Lord. This is the decision, I think, that we've got to make every day. Many years ago, when I first went into the ministry, it was a small church and we had one man on the council who was not a very godly man. In fact, I don't even think he was converted. And somehow he got on the council and he was a rich man and his tithe basically paid my old salary. And he didn't like the gospel principles that I ran the church by. And he came to me one day and he said, listen, I don't want you to do this and I don't want you to do that. And I said, well, I'm sorry, I'm the pastor here and I need to do those things.

And he said, well, then I'll leave and take my tithe with me. And I said, well, that's fine. Because at the end of the day, I said, it's God's tithe, it's not your tithe. But I don't deny the fact that I was pretty scared because I needed a salary. But sometimes you've got to make that kind of decision. So the first bit of advice, you've got to, as you face criticism, always remember who it is you ultimately answer to. Sometimes that's going to be very tough. And sometimes you've got to really remind yourself of that. Now, the second bit of advice is this, and I'm going to spend a little bit more time on this because a very interesting bit of advice that Paul gives us, and that is simply this, all human judgments are provisional. Let me give it to you again because it's so important. All human judgments are provisional. 1 Corinthians 4 from verse 3 to verse 5. I'm going to read those verses out to you. And again, as you read the text with me, ask yourself, why does he say that? What is he reacting to? What were they doing? What were they thinking? Right, here we go.

I care very little if I am judged by you or any human court. I do not even judge myself.

[ 28 : 03 ] My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore, judge nothing before the appointed time. Wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time, each will receive his praise from God. Now, let's quickly have a look at that passage and those verses. First of all, look at the word judge. I care very little if I'm judged. In the original language, judge is a very powerful word. It's a critical word. It's almost the kind of harsh judgment that you'll get from a magistrate in the court. It's a harsh word. So in other words, if Paul came to our ladies' group, yes, and marks, and spoke to our ladies' group, he wouldn't speak to them like this.

If the Corinthians had come to Paul and said, dear brother, we've got some positive, uplifting, helpful criticism to offer you, I don't think he would have responded like this. But you see, they were judging him in an arrogant, high-handed, unhelpful manner. They were arrogant.

They were treating him as if they were a divine court. That's why he says, I care very little if I'm judged. It's harsh judgment. It's unhelpful judgment. You know, sometimes you need the discernment, don't you, to say, I'm not going to get hung up on this because this judgment is nonsense.

See, that's Paul. He had the maturity to realize some judgments you take seriously, others you say, listen, I don't care. I don't care. I care very little if I'm judged by you in a human court.

Because they were approaching him as if they were the divine court. They were treating him as if they had the insights of God. You know, the kind of judgment that God is going to meet out on the day of judgment? They were saying, we can bring that judgment to you and your ministry right now. And Paul says, you can't. All human judgments are provisional. Wait until the Lord comes. You're not God. You can't make an absolute critical judgment about my life and my ministry now. You can't do that. Wait until the Lord comes. He will reveal the thoughts and the ministries and the results of the ministries of different Christians on that day. So Paul is very clear here. He discerns between criticism that is just arrogant and judgmental and unhelpful and that which is ultimately constructive. Now, let me refer you in this regard to another passage of Paul in Romans 12 that many of us know. Romans 12 from verse 2 to verse 3 where the apostle Paul says, do not conform to the Corinthians in Rome. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. What wonderful words. How do you get that going in your life? How do you begin to see the gospel renewing your mind? Well, this is what he says.

[ 31 : 08 ] Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment. In other words, if you want to be helpful to others, you've got to become a person who knows himself. You've got to be self-sensitive, self-critical. You need self-awareness. As I've ministered to folk over the years, I've come more to realize that if I'm going to be helpful to others and try and get the speck out of their eyes, I've got to know my own weaknesses. I've got to know my own prejudices. I've got to know something about the plank in my own eye. Now, these Corinthians had zero self-reflection. They were so arrogant in their giftedness and in their talents, they were so arrogant they had zero self-reflection. And Paul basically says to the Corinthians and the Romans, if you want to be transformed in the gospel, if you want to mature, one of the first things you've got to do before you start criticizing other people, look at yourself. Learn about your own weaknesses. Then you'll be better equipped by God to help others. But the thing that really interests me in these passages and in these verses, 1 Corinthians 4 from verse 3 to 4, where he says, indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that doesn't make me innocent. It's the Lord who judges me. What a remarkable statement. I do not even judge myself. Now, Paul is not saying that he's against judgment. Paul is not saying there's no judgment day coming, but what Paul is saying that sometimes when you're in the Christian world and when you're trying to live the Christian life and when you're trying to reach out to others, you need to learn sometimes you can become your own worst critic. Paul is saying that at the end of the day, when it comes to the full extent and subsequent consequence of my own ministry, I don't even know what God is going to do with my work. And if I don't even know, you can't know. There's a sense in which we can become our own worst critics. We can come to the conclusion that we're useless or that we're not gifted enough or we're not wealthy enough. Paul says, if I don't even know what God is going to do with my prayers for the unbelieving folk out there, if I don't even know how God is going to produce fruit from my ministry at the end of the day, who are you to come and tell me that you know?

You know, it might well be at the end of time as a Christian. You might be sitting with the Lord Jesus in heaven. What a wonderful thought. And you might be sitting with the Lord Jesus on a park bench. I'm sure they're going to have park benches in heaven. And there's going to be this huge big park, even bigger than Central Park, and there's going to be all these park benches. And you're going to be sitting with the Lord Jesus on a park bench in heaven. And the Lord might well say to you, what do you think was the most effective thing that you ever did for anybody in your Christian life ministering to somebody else? And you might say, oh, well, at the church, they planned this evangelistic outreach. And I handed out some tracts. And that was probably the most important thing I ever did. And I'm sure that that was very important for the kingdom. And you know, the Lord might well reply and say, yes, you're right. But do you remember many, many years ago, you might have even forgotten that one day at the bus stop, you sat down for three minutes and you chatted to a lady who was very, very upset. You told her that Jesus loved her and died for her.

And you might respond and say, ah, but that was just three minutes. I mean, she didn't even listen to me. And the Lord will say, yes, from your perspective. But let me open up your mind and your heart and show you what happened in the life of that woman after you shared that little moment of your faith with her. Let me show you what I did and how I planted that fruit. And you might at that moment have your mind blown at what Jesus did.

In other words, our perspective on the ultimate fruit of our lives is limited. It's not like working for old mutual or sandman. If you're selling insurance for old mutual or sandman, at the end of the cycle, at the end of the year, your boss calls you into the office and says, right, black and white, how many policies did you sell? That's the way the world works. Fruit, results, profit, it's got to be in black and white. But it's not like that with Christian work.

So don't give up if you're praying for somebody you love who isn't an unbeliever and you haven't seen any fruit yet. Paul says to the Corinthians, you can't criticize me in a way, in a sense, as if you're God. Only the Lord knows the full extent of our work in our ministry with others.

[ 35 : 31 ] So my final remark as we end, and I think this is the most helpful bit of encouragement that I have to offer you today from Paul, especially for those of us who are feeling a bit down, those of us who are feeling a little bit ordinary, well, God's power works through weak people.

That's the bottom line. It happens that way because God chooses it to happen that way. God deliberately takes everyday struggling, doubtful folk like you and I, everyday people with everyday salaries, there's nothing special about us, everyday jobs, we've got an everyday church, we're not the richest people in the world, we don't have the richest church in the world, we're not the cleverest people in the world, we don't have the most glamorous life, we bring up kids, mommies will tell you bringing up kids is wonderful, but on the other hand it's not the most glamorous life. You don't always think about the Holy Spirit when you're washing up at night, getting the kids lunch, packing the kids lunch for the next day. But God takes people like us, everyday people with everyday doubts and anxieties, trying to make ends meet, trying to bring the kids up, trying to get the bills paid by the end of the month, you know what it's like. And the Bible tells us that God takes people like us to change the world. And that's why the Corinthian criticism and criticisms from people like the Corinthians are all rubbish, because God deliberately shames the wise because he uses the everyday. 1 Corinthians 1 verse 27, listen to this, this is so exciting, so encouraging. It says,

God chose what is foolish in the world. Now that's me, because I feel like that most of the time. God chose the foolish in the world to save the wise. God chose what is weak in the world, that's me.

God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are. Why? So that no human being might boast in the presence of God. I'm sure the Corinthians shut up after that.

So as a Christian, again, you might be facing criticism for being a Christian. People might be saying you're a loser, not only because of the content of what you believe, but how you live. And indeed, you might be your own worst critic. I find that when I'm stressed and when I'm under fire, I land up doubting myself. That's why I really find Paul's comment, indeed, I do not even judge myself. I find that so helpful. So you might be your own worst critic, but every day the devil, of course, tries to remind us of the fact that we are. We're not the cleverest, we're not the most gifted, we're not the richest and the most powerful and famous people in the world or in the church.

[ 38 : 15 ] But don't allow that to get you into a position where you feel God can't use you. Because if that is how you feel, God is going to reply to all of us today and he's simply going to say this, what absolute nonsense, because my power is made perfect in your weakness. Let's pray.

Our Lord and Heavenly Father, we thank you for the power of your word, the challenge of a gospel response to unwarranted criticism. Lord, many of us are going out tomorrow to work in an unappreciative, hard, critical world. We're going to be rubbing shoulders with people in the workplace who are not of the Christian faith, who don't believe the gospel, who are critical of Christians. And Lord, I pray, especially for those of us at the moment who are feeling unworthy and are feeling unable to share the gospel and to live for Jesus. Those of us who feel that in some way we are deficient.

Lord, just remind us that we're all called by you to serve him. And we're all called by you to honor Jesus and to put the cross at the center of our lives. And that when we do that, you will honor us.

And that through our weak efforts and our weakness, your strength is made evident and manifest and perfect. Amen.