

“Espresso Yourself—Yank the Plank”

I hold in my hand some espresso. Now, normally I only drink espresso once a year and that’s on Christmas Eve. I slip home between one of the four services and have a couple of cups to keep me alert and awake through the midnight service. It’s stout, strong and it’s served in these little cups. This series, “Espresso Yourself,” is the same way. It’s strong, it’s stout and it’s going to be served in a little cup. We are only going to spend four weeks on this series.

Espresso is concentrated, powerful stuff. And in so many ways this is what we want our lives to be like. And in the Bible it’s clear that God wants us to be strong with his strength. Paul wrote this in Ephesians 6:

[SLIDE...] “Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power” (Ephesians 6:10, NIV). So often we feel like our lives, our faith, is weak, watered down, decaffeinated. Sometimes it feels like in our lives we’re just going through the motions, we wake up, go to work, come home, eat dinner, go to bed and start the same thing over again the next day. What’s concentrated and powerful about that?

In our faith journey we sometimes feel like we’re watered down and decaffeinated. Just going through the motions, not really feeling God’s power or presence, God’s life-energy in us.

Let’s face it, decaffeinated coffee isn’t really coffee. I drink decaf if it’s late a night because I don’t need to be awake all night long. Decaf looks like coffee but it’s not really. 2 Tim 3:5 talks about, **[SLIDE...] “having a form of godliness but denying its power” (2 Timothy 3:5, NIV).** That’s what so many of us do. We have something that looks like faith, but it has no power. So this series is about concentrating our lives; concentrating our faith, in way, espresso-ing ourselves. No more watered down lives, no more decaf, half-caf faith. It’s time for some spiritual espresso.

I think if the reality of our lives was revealed, we would see that a lot of us here are living stale, bitter lives. A lot of us here are not living caffeinated lives. Our lives are decaf. They don’t have any motion. They don’t have any direction. So in this series I want to talk about some key things that Jesus talked a lot about that will caffeinate our lives. Things that sometimes we take for granted that if we look at and concentrate on, will espresso our lives and our faith.

Today we’re going to look a negative trait that can seriously decaffeinate our faith. And that’s having a critical spirit. Jesus said in Matthew 7: **[SLIDE...] “Stop judging others and you will not be judged. For others will treat you as you treat them. Whatever measure you use in judging others, it will be used to measure how you are judged. Why worry about a speck in your friend’s eye when you have a plank in your own? How can you think of saying, ‘Let me help you get rid of the speck in your eye,’ when you can’t see past the plank in your own eye? Hypocrite. First get rid of the plank in your own eye and then perhaps you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend’s eye” (Matthew 7:1-5, NLT).**

Over the next several minutes, I want to talk to you about a sin that pops up in my life way too often. What’s the sin? Judging others. What’s the sin? Having a critical spirit. At this point, I know what you are thinking. Some of you are thinking, “Oh, man, I am going to rush out and buy a tape of this talk! I’m going to give it to my father, to my friend, and to my neighbor. I am going to put it in my neighbor’s mailbox. It will just show up there. That’s what I am going to do. Oh, does she need to hear this one! Wow! I can’t wait. I’m going to take notes for someone else.”

That’s tempting. It’s tempting for you and it’s tempting for me to that think about others, but the most important person to think about is you. Let’s think about ourselves right now, because we are the ones who need to hear this. In Matthew 7, Jesus was talking to a bunch of Scribes and Pharisees, a bunch of legalistic people, and a bunch of people who excelled at putting others down. Let me just boil it down. Here is today’s sermon in a sentence. Matthew 7:5 says, **[SLIDE...]“Get rid of the plank from your own eye.”** That’s the sermon in a sentence. “*Get rid of the plank in your own eye.*” Jesus said we have a plank in our eyes. We have some eye wood. Here’s another way to put this sermon in sentence: It’s time for us to yank the plank. Let’s say it together... We are talking about taking the plank in our own eye and yanking it so we can be freed up to live the kind of life that Christ wants — the kind of life that is truly about espresso — real, powerful, and full-strength espresso.

Now we need to notice that Matthew 7:1 has a warning label on it. This is a verse that gets taken out of context all of the time so let's spend a minute on this. In Matthew 7:1. Jesus said, **[SLIDE...]** **“Stop judging others and you will not be judged” (Matthew 7:1, NLT)**. The word “judging” is the Greek term “kreno.” It means to condemn, to damn, or to try someone in the courtroom of your consciousness. That's what it means to judge someone. Now we need to be careful here. Let's ask a few questions: Is Jesus saying that we should avoid taking a moral stand? Is Jesus saying we should not believe in truth or absolutes? No way! Is he saying that we should never give someone constructive criticism? No. In fact, later on in Matthew 18, Jesus tells us how to confront someone lovingly, compellingly, and creatively. We're encouraged in scripture to hold each other accountable and to speak the truth with love.

For example: You're having a pretty in depth conversation with a friend and he says, “You know what? I'm bailing out on my wife and my kids. I'm not in touch with my inner child. I'm not really self-actualized. She's holding me back. So I'm out!”

As a Christian, you say, “I think you are going to mess up here. I don't see any rationale for your decision. Do you realize the collateral damage that is going to take place?” But he looks at you and says, “Aren't you a Christian? Don't you call yourself a believer? Didn't Jesus say stop judging others or you will be judged? Aren't you being intolerant of me?” That's a misuse of what Jesus was saying here. Because there's a difference between being judgmental and holding someone accountable. There's a difference between tearing someone down and standing on the truth. Because truth is truth. You don't say, “Well, if you feel that's right for you then go ahead, bail out on your family.”

What I'm saying is, don't misread this passage and think that you can't hold someone accountable to the truth. But at the same time Jesus is clearly telling us that we cannot condemn someone even if they mess up because that's God's job. Not ours. Stop judging, but don't ever stop holding one another accountable in love.

But let's talk about criticism. Why was Jesus so harsh toward a critical spirit? Why was he so passionate, about pulling out the plank? I'll tell you why. A critical spirit, number one, is cold-blooded. **[SLIDE: “A critical spirit is cold-blooded”]** I don't know about you, but let me just tell you how I criticize. You probably don't criticize this way, but I do. I criticize people who criticize me. Maybe you are not like that. But if someone is critical of me, or if someone puts me in the cross hairs of criticism, then my knee-jerk reaction is to criticize them back. Most of the time I don't do it verbally, but I do it in the courtroom of my consciousness. I find a way to pick them apart, to judge them, to condemn. Criticism is cold-blooded. We like to criticize people who criticize us.

Here is something else about me. I tend to be critical of my peers. See if this rings true: Homemakers are not usually critical of brain surgeons. Brain surgeons are not usually critical of police officers. Teachers are not usually critical of pastors. See, pastors are usually critical of other pastors. Homemakers are usually critical of other homemakers. Real estate agents are usually critical of other real estate agents. Does that ring true for anybody? “You have something I don't have. You have an unfair advantage. You have been elevated to that position. I really deserve that. So, I'm just going to tear you down. Because when I tear you down, when I criticize you, it makes me look better.”

Maybe one or two people know what I am talking about. Do you ever really wonder sometimes what the biggest plank in your life is? Do you ever ask yourself, “What is that plank, that thing, that area that trips me up the most? What is it?” I sometimes wonder that in my life. Let me tell you how to discover what it is. When you criticize someone else, discover what you are actually tearing apart in that other person's life. Because whatever you are criticizing in the other person's life is probably what you deal with the most in your own life. We have the uncanny ability to point out the sin, the junk, in other people's lives that we deal with the most in ourselves. It's pretty amazing, isn't it? It's very convicting. Jesus said, “Don't criticize.” Criticism is cold-blooded.

Let's go back to the text, Matthew 7:1. Jesus said, **[SLIDE...]** **“Stop judging others” (Matthew 7:1)**. Other translations say, “Do not judge.” The language used here is in the present-active-imperative. It means

we should stop **now**. Jesus is saying, “Stop judging others right now.” Today is the day to say, “I’m going to stop.” Make the decision everyday, “I’m not going to go there.”

And what Jesus is saying is in the active voice. Take a wild guess who the subject is. It’s not your father. It’s not your neighbor. It’s not your classmate. It’s you and me. It’s Aaron Brown. I’m the subject. It’s in the imperative. It’s not optional. Jesus was taking the role of a commander here. It’s emphatic. There’s no multiple choice here. It’s just your deal and mine.

Look at Verses 4 and 5, Jesus said, **[SLIDE...]** “**How can you think of saying, ‘Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,’ when you can’t see past the log in your own eye” (Matthew 7:4-5).** It might say in your translation the plank. (In the original language, the word log or plank is a picture of a crossbeam that held up an entire structure.) Do you see the humor there? Jesus loved to use humor. A crossbeam. Some of us have this crossbeam of negativity that holds up the entire structure of our lives. We are just consumed by criticism. We say, “Let me help you get rid of the speck.” Do you see the humor? “Oh, look you have got some sawdust in your contact lens, but I’ve got a Sequoia tree in my eyes.” “You’re very prideful and you are an egomaniac. You are full of lust and greed and look at all the stuff. Can you believe that?”

We like those specks, don’t we? There are a lot of hunters here in Missouri. Thousands upon thousands of hunters converge on Bass Pro Shop’s Outdoor World. We talk about deer season. We talk about turkey season. We talk about all the different seasons. But speck hunting is a year round deal, because we like to put specks in the crosshairs of our criticism. “Oh there’s a speck there. There’s another one. This is cool. Oh, yes, speck hunting. I’m going to hunt you and you. I’ll pick those specks out.”

But God says, “Well, Aaron, how about the crossbeam in your face? How about the sequoia tree in your eye?” “Well, Lord, forget that. Just look at the speck in my wife’s eye, or my co-worker’s eye, or my friend’s eye, or my competitors eye.”

Now look at the first word in verse 5, “*Hypocrite*.” Jesus said that if you are critical, if you are consumed by criticism, then you are a hypocrite.

Let’s just call it how it is, all right? We are all hypocrites. Do you know what the word “hypocrite” means? Hypocrite means wearing a mask, acting in a role, assuming a role that is not yours to assume. Have you ever done that? I have. When we are hypocrites, what do we do? We put on a God-mask; we take on his role. Here’s the throne. [Places a stool in the middle of the stage to represent God’s central rule in our lives which we try to occupy.] God should rule and reign over our lives. We say, “God, you know, I’m going to go ahead and take your position now. I’m going to sit on your throne of judgment. You sit over there, God, and I’m going to judge others. I’m going to judge you. You criticize me. You’re my peer. So, I’m going to judge, judge, judge, and criticize you. That’s what I’m going to do.”

By the way, if, with God’s help, you are able to yank the plank out of your own eye, you still don’t have the right to speck hunting. Even if you’ve yanked the plank, it’s God’s job, not yours and mine, to judge others.

We are being hypocritical when we are critical. We are assuming a role that is not ours to assume. What Jesus is teaching us is to accept people right where they are without approving of their behavior. If you think about it, that’s what God does in my life. He accepts me. He respects me. He doesn’t approve of everything I do, but he accepts me and loves me. We strive to be that way at Saint Paul’s, because God is that way.

So often, though, Christians can fall into the trap of criticizing others under the cloak of Christian concern. “Let’s pray for Sally. She has really messed up again in the dating world. Let’s say a prayer for her right now. Lord, we pray for Sally. She has messed up in another dating relationship. I can’t believe what she has done to this guy. Can you believe it, Lord? She’s done it again.” Then we try to defend ourselves by saying, “Oh, but I’m being spiritual.” Oh, really?

But let’s move on. Criticism is cold-blooded, number one. Number two, not only is criticism cold-blooded, but **[SLIDE: “Criticism is highly infectious.”]** criticism is also a highly infectious disease. Here’s how it works a lot of the time: We’ll throw out criticism like some bait. We’ll put out some feelers to see if other people will pick it up. If you pick it up, well, I like you. Then, you become critical and you catch the disease. In turn, I’ll catch it again, and we spread it around. It’s a highly infectious disease.

In fact, criticism is just like a boomerang. Look at Matthew 7:2: **[SLIDE...]** **“For others will treat you as you treat them. Whatever measure you use in judging others, it will be used to measure how you are judged” (Matthew 7:2, NLT).** I throw criticism out and it comes back. And it hurts. Matthew 6:14-15 says, **[SLIDE...]** **“For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive you your sins.”** So, if I criticize you, abuse you, and critique you, then that same measure is coming back on me. It’s the boomerang effect. So, if you want to get what you are giving, go ahead and give it. Bring it on. But, you do not want to feel the boomerang hit you. I don’t want to feel it either. That’s why Jesus said that criticism is a highly infectious disease.

Criticism is cold-blooded. It’s a highly infectious disease. Number three, a critical spirit is also blinding. I have already shown you this. It’s just blinding. When I am critical, and when I am consumed by criticism, I can’t really see the way God sees. I can’t really see you. I can’t understand that you matter to God. A critical spirit, can blind us.

But once we allow Jesus Christ to yank the plank out of our lives, once we allow him to take it out, two things happen. Number one — we can see the mercy of God. We can see the mercy of God. We have a vertical thing going on. We see the mercy of God.

What is the mercy of God? The mercy of God is simply not getting what we deserve. That’s mercy. It’s not getting what we deserve. What do we deserve? The Bible says because of things we do, or say, or think that are wrong, we deserve death. We deserve a Christ-less eternity. Does God hurl people to hell? No. We make that choice. We are big boys and girls. If we remove the plank, and if we allow Jesus to yank the plank, then we see clearly the mercies of God.

Matthew 5:7 says, **[SLIDE...]** **“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy” (Matthew 5:7).** I need mercy. We all need it. That’s the Gospel. The Gospel is mercy. It’s not getting something we deserve. The Gospel simply means Good News. So, are we consumed by criticism or are we giving good news? Once the plank is yanked, I see the mercy of God.

Then, number two — I can extend the mercy of God. I love this one. I was blind. Now that the plank has been yanked, I can see the mercy of God, vertically. I’m not getting what I deserve. Because I’ve received God’s mercy, I can give other what God has given me. Mercy. Hebrews 3:13 says, **[SLIDE...]** **“But encourage one another daily, as long as it’s called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Hebrews 3:13, NLT).** One of the best ways to show mercy is by encouraging someone, especially when they’ve really blown it.

Once the plank is yanked, we have the opportunity to see the mercy of God – not getting what we deserve. In turn, we can give that mercy to others. We can use mercy to affirm and encourage our spouse, our children, our parents, others we come into contact with, and even those in authority over us. We have an opportunity to put wind in their sails. Encouragement can be like food. We need food to survive, to live. It nourishes us. Encouragement and being positive and seeing the best in others does the same thing. Even the secular world understands it.

Dr. David H. Fink, a psychiatrist for the Veterans Administration wrote an article where he published the results of 10,000 case studies on nervous tension. He came to the conclusion that there was one common trait among all people who suffered from severe tension. He says, “They were habitual fault finders. A critical spirit is a prelude to being mentally imbalanced.” Do you want to sign up for being mentally imbalanced? Do you want to sign up for nervous tension? I don’t. Allow Jesus Christ to yank the plank.

Think about this vertical part. We see the mercy of God. We don’t get what we deserve. We don’t get it. That’s mercy. Because we are vertically right, then horizontally, as we relate to others, we can be right as well. We can express mercy to others. That vertical and horizontal mercy form the cross. Vertical, horizontal, it’s all about the mercy of God.

So as you look at your life ask yourself if you are living a caffeinated life. Or are you allowing a critical spirit to decaffeinate you? Jesus said this is one of the most important parts of espressoing yourself. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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