

“Think who you criticize!” Mark 12:38-44

“And in his teaching he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.” And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him and said to them, “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

Have you noticed how rude this Jesus was? As we can read in the Gospels, He kept criticizing people around Him, He kept saying things that people really didn't like. He probably hadn't lived in society like ours where you can learn good manners.

Let's begin with a simple question. Who does Jesus criticize in the Bible? Who does Paul criticize in his letters? Who do the apostles criticize? Do they criticize the world or do they criticize - God's people?

Think about it! Sure, we can say that they all were critical about the world around us, acknowledging that the world is a broken place where the father of lies reigns, this is why are warned not to conform with this world (Rom 12:2).

But, did they criticize people in the world? No! They engaged with them. With different people. Jesus spent His time with real sinner. Real meaning real, not some self-righteous people who are making fun: “O-o, I'm such a sinner.”

Jesus spent time with tax collectors and with prostitutes. Tax collectors were people who would use their authority to cheat you, to rob you, to take as much money from you as they could. Prostitutes, you know what prostitutes do, what kind of services they deliver. Jesus went to these people and engage with them.

Think about the apostle Paul! Who did he invite to join his congregations? Listen to the list he himself presents in his letter to Corinthians. “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? The sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, men who practice homosexuality, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, swindlers. And such were some of you.”

There is a place in Christ's church for everyone. If you are a real sinner, longing for forgiveness, the Church is the right place for you. Your past doesn't matter, your old life doesn't matter. Because of Christ, through Him and with Him each of you have God's gift of new life, both here and in the age to come.

We can see it in the Gospels. Whoever followed Jesus changed. Prostitutes left their occupation (Lk 7), tax collectors repented (Lk 19), and gave back what they had robbed ... they all changed, they begun new life, the life of Jesus' disciple.

Back to our question, who did Jesus and who did Paul criticize? The answer is - religious people. Yes! Jesus often criticized those who thought that they were decent people. Good in their own eyes and in the eyes of society, deserving honour and respect. The same we can see also in our today's reading, where Jesus criticized the scribes.

This is something we need to remember and understand very clearly, and I'm afraid that we often get it upside down. Remember, we are not to criticize people in the world, those who are not Christians. Why would we criticize them?

They are not Christians, they are not followers of Christ. We can't expect them to act as Christians. They don't believe what we believe. They don't even know what we know. They haven't heard the Gospel. Why should we criticize them?

They live according their understanding about this world. In darkness and without Christ. Instead of criticizing them, we need to rescue them. We need to bring them to Christ, we need to share what we know - the words of forgiveness and life.

It is very different when we come to those who think that they are Christians, but don't act like ones. This is where our critique has to come in. This is what Jesus did, this is what Paul and the apostles did.

I'll restate it once more. We are not to criticize those outside the Church, for they are not Christians, and they are not supposed to live as Christians. Instead, we have to criticize those inside the Church, who think that they are Christians, but don't act like ones.

For those outside of the Church Jesus and the apostles didn't have any expectations, for they were still captives of Satan. However, they had very high expectations towards those who were freed to follow Jesus.

How do we get it confused? You already can imagine. Yes, we love to criticize those outside the Church. They are this and they are that, and it may be even true, but then we can say that it is so good that we are not like them.

Whom do we hesitate to criticize? Yes, ourselves, our brothers and sisters in Christ. This is where we get confused. We criticize those with whom we need to engage where they are, and we close our eyes to those who are supposed to live as Christians, but openly neglect it. This is a huge problem for the Church.

But why would we compare ourselves with someone, who is not Jesus' disciple? Why? What we should compare ourselves with is the standards that Jesus sets for us as His disciples.

Why don't we do that? Aha! Because then we'll have a very different picture. Then there is nothing to boast about. Then we can't flatter ourselves by seeing us as such great people, such great Christians.

Then we would see that there are so many things for us to be criticized for. That's why we often chose to compare ourselves with the world, and then, yes, usually we are kind of better, at least we can think so.

This is exactly the attitude that Jesus is condemning in today's Gospel reading. The scribes were not some kind of evil people, they were not sinners like the tax collectors or the prostitutes. They were really good, pious people.

They thought that they were followers of the true God. To translate it into our today's situation, we could say, they thought they were good Christians, and they loved to be honoured and respected for their goodness. Their goodness!

Why would Jesus criticize them? Today's Gospel reading helps to understand Jesus expectations. Jesus was watching people putting their money into offering box, and there were many people who put in large sums. But then came this poor widow and put in two smallest coins that there were.

Remember, denarii was one day's wages. The coins this widow put it made 1/64 of day's wages. It was literary nothing. But seeing her donation Jesus said: **"Amen, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."**

What made her donation so special? Because she gave from undivided heart. As Jesus put it, she gave all she had to live on. She put her entire life in God's hands. She trusted that the Lord will be faithful to His promises and will take care of her.

Why did Jesus call together His disciples and specifically emphasized what the widow has done? Because this is what He expects from all His disciples. So that you put your whole life into His hands and follow Him with undivided heart.

We need to be careful how we understand this. People had done foolish things. For example, they have left their families thinking that this will please God, or they had literary sold everything and given it to the Church, hoping that this will bring them God's blessings.

This is not what Jesus expects. When you become His disciple, He expects that you will love Him more than anything, that you will grow in your understanding and trust that everything you are and everything you have, you have received from Him. That your greatest fear will be to lose Him, your Saviour, to lose your faith.

He expects that you will live your whole life conforming to His will. Dwelling in His word, receiving His Holy Meals in the community of His saints, learning about Christ and sharing His Gospel, husbands loving their wives, wives respecting their husbands, parents bringing up children in discipline and instruction of the Lord. Children obeying and respecting parents.

Employees obeying and serving your employers as to Christ, employers, serving your employees as Christ, knowing that He is the Lord over all. Praying for your enemies, being sexually pure, giving generously, knowing that all you have are God's gifts, so that you can use them for the sake of your neighbours.

These are not some kind of arbitrary commands. This is how our lives are supposed to be. When you become Jesus' disciple He simply begins to restore your humanity, the Image of God in you.

To be able to live this way is true freedom and God's gift. When we do this, we have enough, for ourselves, for the Church, and we have this joy that comes from living as Jesus' disciple and... some new people may become Christians.

Why was it so hard for the scribes? They loved their honour and prestige, their status more than God. Why it is so hard for us? Because there are things which we love more than Jesus, and these things we fear to lose more than we fear to lose Jesus.

Which simply means, that if there was a risk to lose Jesus or these things, many would choose to lose Jesus. People would choose to lose eternal life for the sake of what they have as their true gods. Think about it...

You can examine yourself and see what your gods are. Just ask yourself a few questions. What have I sacrificed most for? What has cost me most? Following Jesus and sharing His Gospel with others, or something else?

What do I desire to obtain most? What does my heart long for? To know my God, to be with Him, or something else? Where do I spend my time? How much time do I spend with and for Jesus, reading His word?

How do I spend my money? In service to the Gospel, or in service to myself? What do I fear to lose most? These questions can help us to see what our true gods are. We all have them. This is why Jesus' critique and that of the apostles apply to us.

We don't need to criticize those in the world. We don't need to elevate ourselves looking at the world around. We need to criticize ourselves measuring ourselves against Jesus' expectations for our lives. If we want to be His disciples, we need to strive to live as His disciples.

And by criticizing I don't mean calling someone names: "O, you are not a Christian if you don't do this or that!" What was the purpose of Jesus critique or that of the apostles? Was it to humiliate someone? Was it to put someone down? Never! So what should be the purpose of our critique?

It always has to be about building someone up. About freeing people from their idols, and helping them to become better disciples. It is the most loving thing if you help your brother or sister in Christ to become a better Christian.

On the other hand, it is the most unloving thing if you see that your brother or sister in Christ has been enslaved by idols and don't fear to lose Christ and eternal life anymore and ... you keep silent. If you love someone, you want them to live, not to die.

It may seem that all this discipleship is very hard. It is. True, it requires a lot. But just think about it! Jesus went out and called the apostles to follow Him and they left everything. Is it different today? No! Essentially it is the same.

You are called by the same Jesus Christ to be His disciples. Dwell on this thought! Jesus Himself is the One who calls you to follow Him. He calls you! You are not called to be disciples of your pastor, or of your congregation. You are called to be disciples of the Son of God. Called personally by Him.

This is unbelievable call. This is as high a calling as you could imagine. The Son of God has called you to be His disciple. More, He has redeemed you, He has bought you by paying with His own life, so that you could freely follow Him.

Now you belong to the Divine Family, to the Church of Jesus Christ; all these are God's gifts, and at the same time - it is unbelievable responsibility. It should occupy your thoughts days and night. Don't take it lightly!

Do your best to follow Jesus with undivided heart, for we can always do better. And as you follow Him, remember, because that's Him who called you, He will never let your hand go, so don't you let go of His.

Amen.