

## ***Quieting Your Inner Critic***

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Our sermon series is about overcoming the obstacles to happiness. For many, your biggest obstacle is that critical voice in your own head.

We all have that voice that makes us self-aware. It's supposed to help us evaluate how we fit in, how well we are doing. It lets us know when we mess up, make a mistake, fall short. But sometimes that voice just doesn't know when to shut up. It keeps running its mouth, running our spirits down, making us feel horrible and insecure. Unrelenting self-criticism goes hand in hand with depression and anxiety. In a recent psychiatric study revealed that those who were most self-critical were the most likely to be depressed and experience difficulties in relationships.

I don't know about you, but my inner critic is a real loudmouth, always chattering in my ear. Anytime something good happens it says, "Yeah, but... you could have done it better. It won't last." When I mess up it says, "Told you so." I suspect I'm not alone.

The costs of giving too much attention to that inner critic are enormous. As Tara Mohr in her book, *Playing Big* says, "Think of all the ideas unshared, businesses not started, important questions not raised, talents unused. Think of all the fulfillment and joy not experienced because self-doubt keeps us from going for the opportunities that would bring that joy and fulfillment."

So, you've got this loudmouth in your head, pretending to be on your side, protecting you from getting humiliated, but it keeps you from living your best life. Today we are going to look at a couple of things from our faith that can help us quiet that inner critic.

### **Listen to God's Voice not Your Inner Critic's**

I chose the temptation of Jesus narrative today because I think it gives some insight on how to handle this. Even though the story personifies the devil as a person rather than an interior monologue, the word for devil translates, "the accuser" or "the adversary." No one pictured the devil as a dude in a red suit and horns until after Dante wrote the *Inferno* in the middle ages. In this story the devil functions very much like the inner critic, your inner accuser, and adversary.

The devil is constantly playing off of what he thinks is a vulnerable spot for Jesus, challenging Jesus to prove his identity. Before each temptation, he says, "If you are the son of God," do this. *If you are, prove it.* The inner critic is constantly hitting at insecurity about our worthiness, our right to take up space on the planet. How many times have you over-reached and did something because you felt basically insecure? Maybe you buy something you can't really afford, you put your hope in some product or program to finally make you feel okay about yourself. Maybe you act all Mr. Know it all when you don't really have a clue. You fake it. There are so many ways that basic insecurity tempts us to try to prove ourselves.

Jesus doesn't defend himself or do something stupid like jumping off a cliff to prove himself. He isn't as interested in himself, as trusting in who God is. God is the one who provides. The story

of Jesus overcoming the temptations is the story of someone who doesn't succumb to the need to act out as a way of proving himself. He rests in the trust of God rather than getting stirred up by his anxiety over his identity. He learned to listen to God's voice rather than the accuser.

### **Your Inner-critic Fights Dirty**

Dealing with your inner critic is a skill you can develop over time. It's something you can work on and get tools to help you. Some researchers say just giving your inner critic a name and recognizing when he or she is trying to take over is important. One person said she calls hers "The Gremlin," Just pausing to recognize that voice for what it is an internal critic not the voice of reality, can help you get perspective. You can learn to channel Ronald Reagan in that famous debate with Mondale. When you hear the gremlin blabber on and on dismiss it with, "Well. There you go again."

Like the devil in the temptation story, your inner critic is a liar. Just because you overate at the picnic does not make you a pig who can never feel good about your body. Just because your finances are tight right now doesn't mean you are a loser. Just because you've made some mistakes doesn't mean you are a bad person. The inner critic universalizes incidents and draws invalid conclusions. The effect is to keep you in shame.

Shame simply cannot survive once someone, anyone, calls it out and says 'I understand but those thoughts aren't true.' Even if you're saying it to yourself. Challenge negative thoughts with hard facts. Keep a list of your achievements and pull it out when self-criticism threatens to overwhelm you.

Recognize the difference between thoughts that are critical and those that are constructive. If you overeat at a picnic, thinking "I am a fat pig" that is a condemnation, whereas thinking "I'll make a plan to start eating better" is a conviction. "Your goal should be improvement, rather than putting yourself down."

### **Religious Shame is Part of the Problem**

*If* you are the son of God. For many people, religion contributes to, rather than alleviates from this. This is especially true when faith is presented as basically following a bunch of rules—a list of do's and don'ts. Your worthiness, your value as a human being relies on how well you follow these rules. But they are such high standards of perfection when we fail instead of feeling grace, we are only reminded of the gap between what is acceptable behavior and what our own inclinations really are. It's crazy making. It exacerbates the sense and level of shame people carry around with them. To your inner critic, shame and guilt are like spinach to Popeye. Soon this Popeye takes over and makes a mess of everything.

As I see it, Jesus came to talk about God's mercy and grace. Jesus was about forgiveness and accepting people even in the midst of their faults and elevating them.

What's happened in the name of religion is tragic. No kid should have to grow up wondering if their parents are going to reject them. No kid should grow up wondering if their church is going to reject them. No kid should grow up assuming their creator has already rejected them. This is the Sunday of National Suicide Prevention Week and one of the biggest at-risk populations are LGBTQ adolescents. I think as a congregation can be part of the solution rather than part of the problem by declaring that this is a safe space. This is a safe space where no one has to feel on trial, ashamed, judged, fundamentally flawed. Whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey you are welcome here. You are affirmed as God's beloved--here.

### **Faith without Shame and Guilt**

You need to stop listening to what the inner critic says about you so that you can hear what your maker says about you. The inner critic is always presenting a distorted image like mirror of the funhouse. The image isn't true because the mirror is warped. You are created in the image of God. Your maker is your mirror. Not what other people are posting. Not on how big their house is compared to yours. Not some air-brushed super-model on the cover of Cosmo. Your maker is your mirror. He says you are fearfully and wonderfully made.

You are created in the image of God, and your basic identity is the beloved of God. What does Jesus say? He says the kingdom of God is within you. He said, "I'm here to give you abundant life." He said the great commandments, the ones that count are to love God and love your neighbor as yourself. And to do that you have to have self-compassion. One day when my inner critic was being especially obnoxious I thought, "I'd go over and clean his clock if I heard someone talking to a loved the way I'm talking to myself, right now." If you wouldn't tolerate someone talking to a loved one the way you talk to yourself, maybe you will see what to do.

A lot of research has gone into the science of happiness. The science of happiness podcast out of Berkley had a whole episode devoted to the studies that have shown self-compassion is effective in silencing the inner critic. Contrary to popular belief, research shows that self-compassion is a better motivator of change than self-criticism. Instead of kicking yourself for messing up, self-compassion allows you to evaluate the situation in a safe, non-judgemental way so you can learn and grow without drowning in a sea of shame.

"The basic idea is to learn to view thoughts, ideas, concepts, and emotions as learning experiences so you can find more positive ways to see or accept the situation...This leads to trusting your inner wisdom and consequently to living a happier life."

### **Self-compassion Letter**

One tool is to write a self-compassion letter. You write a letter to yourself as if you were your mentor, a friend. Sometimes just getting outside of yourself that much can make a difference. You are much harder on yourself than you would be to a friend who did something similar to you.

One man who tried this shared the letter he wrote to himself. He is a guy who admits a lot of things he regrets and says he is incredibly hard on himself. But he took the time and this is what he came up with.

*You are not inadequate. The fact is everyone feels scared at some point in their lives. Most people feel inadequate at times that you experience these feelings daily, constantly, and can still show up for your family and community and for yourself as a more accurate measure of who you are. People are not defined by their feelings or actions. But if you must know yourself as something, you should know that you are as deserving of feeling ok as anyone. You are as qualified to take credit for your life as anyone. Sure, you and your benefits and resources even internal resources are derived from the past efforts of others. So then say that. Say to yourself and to those unfortunates who try to compliment you, thank you. You could have chosen differently.*

He says the exercise has helped him and made a profound effect on his life. A letter. An exercise of self-compassion. And now he has this sense of gratitude turning outward with a new focus because he has a new outlook on his interior life.

This I know. Our message is that the same Spirit that was alive in Jesus, that helped him deal with his adversary is in you to help you deal with yours. The same Spirit that helped Jesus overcome his temptations is in you to help you deal with the temptation you feel to let that inner critic control how you feel about yourself and the world. I believe if you practice self-compassion and trust that Spirit and listen more to what God says about you, you will learn to quiet that inner critic. Amen.

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