

*Introduction*

**I have been working in my yard lately.** I like a nice looking yard. I enjoy looking at lush green grass, inviting shade trees, bushes of all sort of sizes and varieties, and flowers of every color and type. I like all that pretty vegetation, but I have found that a picturesque lawn is hard to get and difficult to maintain. I find that if I am not diligent, my yard can quickly look pretty beat. Dead spots in the grass and weeds quickly multiply. It is easy for a good lawn to go bad. This is true for our lawns; this is also true for the church, the body of Christ.

**Today we are going to the words of Paul** to a growing community of believers in First Century Rome where things were starting to go bad. This book of Romans has been a masterpiece of theology and practical wisdom for the church throughout the centuries. Today we are looking at the power of our words to build up or destroy a community.

**One of the issues facing the faith community in Rome was criticism.** People were critical of each other. They were making judgments about one another's faith. Some people thought that you should worship on the Sabbath, which was Friday night to Saturday night in Jewish tradition. Others believed that Jesus gave them the freedom to worship any and every day! Another concern was the eating of meat that had been used in idol worship. Some thought because it had been dedicated in a pagan temple ceremony, you should not touch it even though it might be cheaper on the open market. They chose vegetables to eat instead. Others believed that because they know that idols are false gods, they can eat whatever we want. They believed that Christ freed them from all pagan influences.

**As you can imagine, some heated discussions occurred** around these and other issues. The temptation for all of us is to criticize those who do not agree with us. Our other temptation is to judge them as wrong and less righteous than ourselves. Paul jumps right into this conflicted community with this wisdom.

**Romans 14:7-13 (The Message)**

*6-9 What's important in all this is that if you keep a holy day, keep it for God's sake; if you eat meat, eat it to the glory of God and thank God for prime rib; if you're a vegetarian, eat vegetables to the glory of God and thank God for broccoli. None of us are permitted to insist on our own way in these matters. It's God we are answerable to—all the way from life to death and everything in between—not each other. That's*

*why Jesus lived and died and then lived again: so that he could be our Master across the entire range of life and death, and free us from the petty tyrannies of each other.*

*10-12 So where does that leave you when you criticize a brother? And where does that leave you when you condescend to a sister? I'd say it leaves you looking pretty silly—or worse. Eventually, we're all going to end up kneeling side by side in the place of judgment, facing God. Your critical and condescending ways aren't going to improve your position there one bit. Read it for yourself in Scripture: "As I live and breathe," God says, "every knee will bow before me; every tongue will tell the honest truth that I and only I am God." So tend to your knitting. You've got your hands full just taking care of your own life before God.*

*13-14 Forget about deciding what's right for each other. Here's what you need to be concerned about: that you don't get in the way of someone else, making life more difficult than it already is. I'm convinced—Jesus convinced me!—that everything as it is in itself is holy. We, of course, by the way we treat it or talk about it, can contaminate it.*

*Growing a healthy community*

**I drove by a neighbor's house last week and their lawn was covered with dandelions.** I thought to myself smugly, "They've got dandelions. Don't they care? Somebody must be asleep at the wheel. What kinds of people live in that house anyway?" See how quickly I moved from an observation, "They've got dandelions" to a criticism "Don't they care?" In no time I jumped from a criticism to a judgment, "What kinds of people live in that house anyway?" This progression of my thinking was all very subtle and quick.

**With such thinking going on in my head,** how to you think that is going to affect my relationship with my neighbors? Would I likely think positive thoughts about them in the future? Would I go out of my way to greet them or get to know them? Would I pray for them or look for ways to love and serve them? No way. My relationship with them is cursed because of my attitude towards them. Do you know what is really ironic in this story? The next week I go out to work in my lawn. Know that I put down weed barrier on my lawn at the beginning of spring and thought my grass looked good. As I walked around the yard to clean up some things, however, I noticed I had dandelions! Lots of dandelions! They were all hiding just behind the grass and were ready to pop up in full glory in a few days. I need to tend to my own lawn and not worry about my neighbor down the street.

**There is a lawn treatment program called the "Step Program."** Here is my treatment program for our community and our relationships.

### *Step One - Treat the weeds in own yard*

**When we focus on the faults** of each other, our community begins to split apart. That was true in Rome, and that is also true in Lancaster. Criticism has a way of poisoning a church. Why do we criticize one another? **Often we criticize someone because there is a problem that needs addressing**. If there is a child spilling food on the carpet we may say “Excuse me, you are dropping food.” That is not a criticism, it is an observation. If I say, “The parents of young children these days do not care what their kids do anymore,” then I have moved to criticizing. *Criticism is out to find fault, not really to help in a given situation.*

- If I want to be helpful, then I would have offered to assist the child rather than critiquing the parents.
- If I disagree with someone, my task is to seek to listen to them and understand them, not dismiss them with criticism.

**We might be critical of others because we are frustrated**. Maybe I am helping around the church as an usher, running the sound or video, or setting up hospitality. I can get frustrated if I feel like I am doing all the work and everybody else is sitting around and not volunteering to help as well. It would be tempting to grumble and complain about it. Who likes getting stuck with all the work? Rather than complain, I should let people know my frustration and ask them to work with me on a solution.

**Another reason we may be critical of others is because we are mad or upset about something else** and we need a target to release for our anger. We have trouble at work and take it out on our families. Or we may a conflict at home is souring our work and church lives. As I find myself with a critical spirit, I need to ask myself, “*What is going on with me? What issue am I avoiding?*” The Holy Spirit is in our lives to help us pull out the weeds. When we ask God to help us deal destructive attitudes and habits in our lives, he will.

**The first step is to admit we have weeds.** If things are a mess in my life, I may not want to own or change that fact. Start with a simple prayer: “*God show me areas of my life that need your tender gardening.*” As we ask and listen, God will show us where to start. We may need to confess a sin and ask forgiveness. We may need to own that we have been hurt and seek help in our healing process. Criticism tries to hide the weeds in our own lives. A humble and contrite heart will begin to deal with them.

### *Step Two - Plant healthy plants in the bare spots*

**I found that after I have pulled out weeds there is a bare spot.** If I do not plant grass or flowers there, more weeds will come. In our life as community, the flow of conversation goes one of two ways. Either we choose to build up and encourage one another or we drift into criticism. After the Easter service, I got a phone call thanking

me for my sermon. I was on my way home and feeling good, but tired. It was amazing how that one phone call filled me with energy and encouragement. I was still reflecting on that call the next day. It blessed me so much that I realized I wanted to pass the encouragement forward. I sat and wrote a few emails to people who had recently blessed me. I noticed later that day that the people I wrote were responding to me and others with their encouragements as well. One good word sparked a whole network of caring support. Who needs and is waiting for your word and my word of encouragement? Let us go and plant seeds of encouragement today.

### *Step Three - Keep watering and weeding*

**What is Paul telling our friends in Rome and us to do?** Paul knows we are all going to differ on many issues that come up in the church. Some will be personal. There are people we have difficulty understanding and working with. There will be social, political, ethical, and church issues in which we will not all agree. We are committed in Christ to keep listening, keep moving out on the areas we can find consensus. What I love about the faith community in Lancaster is exactly that. We are spending more time focusing on:

- 1) what we *have in common*, our love and devotion to Jesus, and
- 2) what we *can accomplish together*.

The list is going daily of what we are doing together: prison ministry, serving refugees through International Houses of Hope (iHope), supporting our local schools, and setting up The Connection Center in the old Memorial Presbyterian Church on South Queen Street to offer faith-based services to the poor and disadvantaged. God is at work and he wants us working together. As we keep our eyes on Jesus and our critiques to ourselves, we will see God's kingdom grow!

### **Ephesians 4:15**

*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.*

### **Romans 15**

<sup>1</sup> *We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.* <sup>2</sup> *Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up...*  
<sup>5</sup> *May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had,* <sup>6</sup> *so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*