

Criticism Makes Empathy Impossible **(March 26, 2026)**

In a culture as critical as ours, it is hard for us to believe that Paul could honestly say, “But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself.” (1 Cor. 4:3) Paul seems to be aware that to permit judgment, criticism, and condemnation into his heart and life would make it impossible for him to be a faithful steward of God. This truth is a key to edifying relationships: criticism makes empathy impossible.

If we are harboring judgment, criticism, or condemnation toward another person, we will not be able to offer them empathy at the same time. They will feel attacked rather than understood. This will prevent them from feeling safe enough to share openly and vulnerably. And it may even lead them to retreat from us or re-attack us in a fight-or-flight response to their unsafe feelings.

However, in the context of relationships, judgment in the other direction is just as harmful to empathy. If we are trying to listen, understand, and empathize with a person who is judging us, criticizing us, or condemning us, the person who is sharing will block the empathy in the person who is listening. Marshall Rosenberg says it this way, “Empathy is impossible if we assume responsibility for [another person’s] feelings and take messages personally.” (Nonviolent Communication p. 94)

So how do we approach difficult conversations that involve intense emotions and require tricky negotiation to reconcile important relationships? Henry Cloud’s advice is very wise...

“We go hard on the issue, but soft on the person.”

This means we can vigorously discuss and debate a topic as long as we don’t make it personal. But the moment we question the other person’s intentions, character, integrity, or care, we are attacking the person. And that judgmental, critical, and condemning attack will cause further distance in the relationship, even if we “win” the argument.

“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Rom. 8:1)
May God help us to live like that is true!