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Words of Advice

My grandfather suggested that before one opened one's mouth to comment to or about another person, one should first ask oneself three simple questions, 'Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind?' My father, a rather down to earth Yorkshire man, thought it prudent to qualify his father's advice. He told his children that the only problem, if we were to follow this rule to the letter, would be that life would become exceedingly boring. Recently my journalist nephew suggested a further question 'Is it funny? He feels that humour can excuse all.

My nephew has a point, as had my father, but these three questions can act as a useful check when one is tempted to make a witty comment at someone else's expense. Although what is about to be said may be broadly true, it is very often not really necessary to say it and unkind to do so. The over arching excuse proffered within the media, when exposing the private lives of well known figures, is to proclaim that their revelations are in the public interest. Are some of these exposés really in the best interests of the general public and is it always necessary for an individual's conduct to be dissected and subjected to the public gaze, even if what is reported is broadly true? After all, a life may be broken as a result.

Criticism should be accepted in the spirit it is given and most of us can take a joke made at our own expense. There can be a fine line dividing gentle humour and more overtly barbed remarks, however, and some yardstick is useful to keep us on the right side of this line. The Christian life is led, not primarily in our churches, but in the cut and thrust of daily life and our repartee with family, friends and colleagues.