

“Judge Without Being Judgmental”

Matthew 7:1-6

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There's a story on the internet about a lady who had some time in an airport between flights, so she bought a book and a bag of cookies, and sat down in a waiting area. She opened the bag of cookies and her book, and began to read. A man was sitting next to her. When she got comfortable, she reached down and took a cookie from the bag. Then the man reached in and took one out, too.

The lady couldn't believe it. She found herself turning red, but she didn't want to cause a scene, so she didn't say anything. She just took a cookie and kept on reading her book, and the man took another. She was really steaming by now, but had to control her temper. She deliberately took another, and saw there was only one left. She was wondering if the man would have the gall to take the last one, when he reached in the bag, took the cookie, broke it in half, and left half for her.

She almost exploded at that point, but luckily her flight was called. Without even looking at the man, she gathered her things up and went to the gate.

She was still fuming when she got on the plane and took her seat. She opened her bag to get her book, when she saw her bag of cookies. Unopened.

Sometimes we judge others without understanding. That kind of person isn't a very good example of Christian character. This morning we look at one of Jesus' famous sayings, “Stop judging others, and you will not be judged.” But it's a saying that is often misunderstood. Let's start by saying what Jesus did *not* mean when he said this.

First, he's not saying criminal courts are wrong.

In the book of Romans, Paul says God put authority in place to assure order.

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. (Romans 13:1)

Even when Jesus was on trial before Pilate, he didn't argue with Pilate's authority to give judgment. The Bible says,

Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above." (John 19:11)

That is, God put Pilate into power for his own purposes. God is a god of order, not chaos, and he puts governments and systems of justice into place for our protection. So, when Jesus tells us not to judge, he isn't saying that human courts are against his will.

Second, he's not saying we shouldn't make evaluations between good and evil.

If we did that, we would be undercutting all the values of scripture. We're *supposed* to tell what's right and wrong, what's of value and what's not, and he even suggests that in the passage. After all, once we pay attention to our own issues, he says "then you can see clearly to remove the log from your brother's eye."

In fact, the Bible says a lot about how important it is to tell the difference between good and evil. It's why Joshua tells God's people,

But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." (Joshua 24:15)

That is, God calls his people through Joshua to turn from other gods, to repudiate evil, and to choose the good. That's also why Paul confronts immorality within the churches. He says in 1 Corinthians,

"What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you." (1 Corinthians 5:12-13)

And in chapter six, he continues,

If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? (1 Corinthians 6:1-2)

That is, in fact, godly discipline. Paul refers to that kind of judgment in 1 Timothy,

Some have rejected [the gospel] and so have shipwrecked their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme. (1 Timothy 1:20)

That's a pretty clear case of making a judgment, wouldn't you say? In the Christian life, we have to discern between good and evil. So when Jesus says we shouldn't judge, he is not saying that good and evil are on a par.

Third, he's not saying we shouldn't judge between truth and lies.

This is a huge priority for the teachers of the New Testament, and the writers keep telling us to judge what's true. So John writes,

Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. (1 John 4:1)

John is saying that the apostles' teaching is the standard for the church's teaching, and he says "this is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood" (1 John 4: 6b) That's why there are lists of both sins and virtues in the New Testament. In the

ancient world, moral teachers taught with lists of virtues and vices. Paul has his, and Jesus does, too. We need to be discerning, and seek the truth.

In Matthew 18 Jesus even gives a process for judging wrongdoing in the church. There has to be a process for us to confront sin, or it will work like a cancer in the family of God. Paul goes along with this when he says not to associate with people who chose a lifestyle of sin. He says,

I wasn't talking about *unbelievers* who indulge in sexual sin, or who are greedy or are swindlers or idol worshippers. You would have to leave this world to avoid people like that. What I meant was that you are not to associate with anyone who claims to be a Christian yet indulges in sexual sin, or is greedy, or worships idols, or is abusive, or a drunkard, or a swindler. Don't even eat with such people. (1 Cor. 5:9-11)

And the whole Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' handbook for Christ-followers, is most concerned with our inner attitudes. It is the same here—the problem he's addressing is a critical, condemning attitude toward others. He's saying, "I want you to judge, I just don't want you to be *judgmental*."

That's what Jesus is *not* saying about judging. So what *is* he saying? What is he warning us about? Jesus is saying don't look down on others.

It's easy to do. We usually don't have a hard time identifying what's wrong about other people. We think we're being critical thinkers, but we're only being critical persons. Everybody's a critic!

- The audience at the Cannes film festival booed the movie "Marie Antoinette."
- We criticize a quarterback for throwing an interception.
- We boo a bad call by an umpire.
- We trash talk our President or politicians we disagree with.
- We criticize our pastor's sermon at home over lunch—no, wait—we wouldn't do that!

Jesus knows that we put others down because we want to lift ourselves up. It's easy to be smug, to feel superior, which isn't far from feeling inferior, defensive, miserable. He wants to free us from that, and it's why Luke says,

He told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt. (Luke 18:9)

That kind of attitude is poison in our spiritual lives. Jesus saw it especially strong in the religious leaders in his time. They thought if you followed all the rules, you were okay. But most people, the masses, couldn't keep up religiously, so the leaders thought they were contemptible.

So Jesus main concern in the passage is that we not judge in the sense of looking down on others. That's being judgmental. In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul equates that kind of judgment with looking down on others, and he warns us to remember our own coming judgment:

You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. (Romans 14:10)

Why is being judgmental wrong? Let me name four reasons.

First, being judgmental is wrong because it's playing God.

Jesus says, "Stop judging others, and you will not be judged." James makes the same point when he says,

Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor? (James 4:11-12)

The thing is, God doesn't need us to judge someone's heart, and he doesn't need our personal standards or set of rules.

Second, being judgmental is wrong because our motives are wrong.

When we judge between good and evil, right and wrong, truth and lies, we have to make sure our motives are right. What Jesus doesn't want is judging from wrong motives. On the surface, it may look okay, but that's only skin-deep. It's like when someone tells you, "I'm only saying this for your own good, but..." But sometimes that's a set up for hurtful criticism.

The only kind of criticism that helps comes out of a motivation of love. 1 Corinthians 13 describes it,

Love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

Third, being judgmental is wrong because it focuses on the wrong things.

What I mean is, I can look at the outside, but God looks at the inside. I can see a homeless person, and think he probably made bad choices that put him there. I can see the headlines on the gossip newspapers at the supermarket checkout stand, and think, "Boy, those movie stars are a mess," but Jesus has compassion for them. I can see the punk or Goth rocker with mascara and sleeve tattoos, and think they're antisocial, but Jesus loves them like he loves me.

But it's easy to confuse biblical teaching with personal preferences. Then we try to impose these on others, and we don't see the real issues.

Fourth, being judgmental is wrong because our perspective is distorted.

Jesus gives us a picture that's really funny, this guy with a log in his eye trying to help another guy with a piece of sawdust in his. It's crazy! Who would do that? But we *do* try to do that in other ways, when we try to fix other people, and at the same time, our own problems are huge. How ironic! So in Luke, Jesus says, "What good is it for one blind person to lead another? The first one will fall into a ditch and pull the other down with him." (Luke 6:39).

Those are funny pictures, but the point they make is serious. Being judgmental is hypocritical. We can be really strict when it comes to others, but we want others to ignore the same wrongdoing when it comes to me. I yell at people who speed through a yellow light, but then I catch myself doing the same thing.

We sure need help on this. With anything Jesus says, it's easy to get out of balance. We can fall to the side of being too harsh, or too lax. That's why Jesus says,

Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces. (Matthew 7:6)

Another way to say that is, "Don't give what is holy to unholy people." He's saying, when someone it's futile to try to share holy things with someone who doesn't want to hear. They'll only tear apart what we say. We should still share God's word with unbelievers, but only when they're open. We should be wise in our witness, so we won't waste our time.

I think it comes down to what Paul calls "speaking the truth in love." Jesus did this, too, because, like John says, "the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14) Grace and truth; when we keep those in tension, we're balanced.

And so he sums up this concern when he says, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." (Matthew 9:13). It is, after all, what he emphasized in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

The Heidelberg Catechism is a great statement of faith of our church. Question 52 asks, "How does Christ's return 'to judge the living and the dead' comfort you?" What? The coming judgment of the world is supposed to comfort us? Yes! Listen to the answer—the Lord's return to judge the world comforts us because:

"In all my distress and persecution I turn my eyes to the heavens and confidently await as judge the very One who has already stood trial in my place before God and so has removed the whole curse from me. all his enemies and mine he will condemn to everlasting punishment: but me and all his chosen ones he will take along with him into the joy and the glory of heaven." (H. C. #52)

The *only* one who can truly judge, the perfect Lord of all, is also our friend who is for us, and he has already stood under judgment for us. Jesus says, "Don't judge in my place. I want to free you from that."