



Judge Not

St. Matthew 7:1-5

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I want to start today with a little story. A lady at an airport bought a book to read and a little package of cookies to eat while she waited at the gate to board her plane. She found a seat at the gate, pulled out the book, and it wasn't long before she was completely engrossed in the story. But then something caught her attention out of the corner of her eye, and she looked over to see the man one seat away fumbling to open the package of cookies sitting on the seat next to her. She was in utter shock that a stranger would help himself to her cookies. She wasn't quite sure how to respond. After watching him munch away for a few moments she gave him an angry glare, grabbed one of the cookies, and shoved it in her mouth – glaring at him as she chewed it. He didn't say anything, but a few minutes later he reached out and took another cookie – so she grabbed another one. That went on, back and forth. Each time he'd quietly and nonchalantly take a cookie, she'd take one in return, all the while giving him the angry look. Ten minutes later they were down to one cookie. The man looked at it, then up at her. He picked it up, broke it in half, and handed one of the halves to her as he got up and left. Well, she couldn't believe the man's nerve!

A few minutes later the woman boarded her plane. She sat down in her seat and started rummaging around in her purse for the book she'd been reading, when she suddenly realised that she had no business judging that man so harshly. She opened her purse wider and looked down. There in the bottom of her purse was the unopened package of cookies she'd bought.

How often do we do that sort of thing? We judge others, when we ourselves are the ones that ought to be judged. I find myself wondering if the woman in the story was a Christian, and the man a non-believer. Here she was sitting next to a person with whom she should have shown Christian love and charity, and instead she

judged him harshly. In the end he showed her the grace that she should have been showing to him. What sort of a witness would it have been if she had been reading her Bible instead of a novel, or if she had been wearing jewellery or clothing that identified her as a Christian?

For the last two weeks we've been looking at Jesus' warnings against love of money and anxiety. Putting either of those things first in our lives will make us apathetic Christians – it will stunt our spiritual growth and kill our Christian witness. If our minds are focused on earthly things, whether it's to accumulate them or worry about them, we won't have our focus on God. But Jesus gives us a third warning of a different kind. You see, if the devil isn't able to kill our witness by making us apathetic to God's call, he can kill our witness by doing the opposite – he can make us zealots. And so Jesus warns us against having a zeal for judging others. Look at Matthew 7:1-5:

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

I think it's important that before we get into what Jesus *does* mean when he commands us to "judge not," that we first make it clear what he *doesn't* mean. And I say that because this first verse has become very popular. It used to be that John 3:16 was the best-known and most oft quoted Bible verse, but surveys now show that it's now Matthew 7:1 – "Judge not, lest ye be judged." And it's usually used by non-Christians – used against a Christian who dares to make a moral judgement and call something a sin. People pull the verse out of context and twist it to say that somehow we're not allowed make that call at all – that we have to suspend our critical faculties when it comes to others and that we have an obligation to turn a blind eye to their faults – that criticism isn't allowed and that we have to refuse to discern between truth and falsehood, between good and evil.

And yet Jesus himself did an awful lot of "judging" – of calling evil, evil, of calling hypocrites, hypocrites. To suggest that we have to suspend all critical faculties would deny that when God created man in his image, he gave us the ability to make value-judgements. Jesus' own teach that we've seen so far in the Sermon on the Mount stresses the *need* for us to discern right from wrong. He calls us to be different from the world. He calls us to have a righteousness greater than that of the Pharisees. He calls us to do "more than others" when it comes to the standard of love we live by, not to be like the hypocrites in our piety or like the world in what we value.

So you see, we can't even begin to do what Jesus tells us if we're not allowed to make value judgements and if we can't evaluate the performance of others and compare it to Jesus' holy standard. And think about the fact that this command is followed just a few verses later by two more commands: to avoid giving "what is holy" to dogs or pearls to pigs (v. 6), and to beware of false prophets (v. 15). If we can't judge at all, then how can we ever discern who are the pigs, the dogs, and the false prophets?

What Jesus is condemning – what he's saying stunts our growth and kills our witness – is that unloving and harshly critical kind of judging that seeks to tear down instead of building up. It's the kind of judging that *wants* to find faults and failings. Remember when Jesus talked about the "generous eye" that lets good light into the body? This is the opposite. It's the stingy eye – the eye that goes around looking to find a problem and wanting people to fail.

Have you ever known someone who was always looking for a fault in others? And if they found what they thought was a fault, but someone else corrected them and showed them they were wrong, then they'd just keep looking for some other fault that was real. That's what Jesus is talking about here. It's a lack of grace and at its core it's a self-righteous attitude.

When we take on that harshly critical spirit, what we're doing is claiming that we have the ability and authority to sit in judgement over other men and women. But it begs the question: To whom are they responsible? They're not responsible to you or me. And are you or I really

appointed as their judge? No. St. Paul picks this up in Romans 14:4:

Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

And he put it all in proper perspective writing to the Corinthians:

For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. (1 Corinthians 4:4-5)

You see, neither you nor I are qualified to be a divine judge. We can only speculate about what might or might not be in the heart of another human being – only God knows for certain. When we're harshly critical in the way that Jesus condemns, what we're doing is arrogantly presuming to anticipate Judgement Day, and we're playing God by trying to take his role on ourselves.

Imagine prisoners gathered in a courtroom with a bailiff watching over them. Their lawyers aren't there yet. The witnesses aren't there yet. The judge hasn't even come in yet to deliberate over their cases. And yet one of those prisoners decides to step up to the bench to play judge. He doesn't have evidence and he isn't qualified. He's in the same boat with the other prisoners waiting to be judged. And the same goes for all of us. None of us is the judge, and in fact, all of us are among those who await judgement. To those of us who have presumed to take the judge's role on ourselves, Jesus warns, that we will be judged with greater strictness: "For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you."

Think about it. If you or I presume to be qualified judges ourselves, how can we plead ignorance of God's law when we've already claimed to know how to judge by it? Even more, how can we plead for mercy from our own judge? St. Paul warns in Romans 2:1:

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.

Jesus warns against judging harshly and critically – against putting ourselves in God's place. And then he gives us this image of the two men, one with a speck in his eye and the other with a log in his. The man with the log in his eye is all agitated over the fact that the other guy has a little speck of dust in his and wants to take care of it for him. It makes you want to ask how the guy with the log in his eye can even see the speck, let alone remove it.

Jesus has a real knack for catching us with our spiritual pants down. Back before Christmas we looked at how Jesus exposes our hypocrisy in relation to God when we practise our piety (our giving, our fasting, and our praying) just to be seen by men. Now he exposes our hypocrisy in relation to others as we critique our brothers and sisters over their peccadilloes, while we fail to deal with our own serious sins. So not only are we unfit to be judges based on the fact that we're fallible, but now Jesus shows us that we're also unfit because we're fallen. Every one of us is a sinner and because of that we're in no position to stand in judgement over our fellow sinners.

Think of that scene where the one man struggles at the touchy task of removing a speck of dust or dirt from his friend's eye, while the big log in his own eye leaves him almost totally blind. It's a ludicrous image. But it's no joke when you think about how we do the spiritual equivalent all the time. Think about the way in which we have a natural tendency to make such a big deal out of the faults of others, while at the same time minimising and covering up our own. An awful lot of the time, when you really come down to it, what we're seeing is our own sins and faults in others and judging them vicariously. It's a great way to experience the pleasure of self-righteousness without the inconvenience and pain of penitence.

And it's at this point that Jesus does some truly righteous judging. He points to each of us and says, "You hypocrite!" The Greek word from which we get *hypocrite*

is *hypokrites*. In ancient Greece it described the work of actors and orators who could put on a good act or a good show – it described their ability to pull one over on the audience. And that's exactly what we do when we're hypocritical judges. We make an act of being kind (taking the speck of dirt out of someone's eye), but in reality we're only pointing out the speck in the first place as a way to puff up our own ego. Think about Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee stood in the Temple for everyone to see and "prayed" to God, thanking him that he wasn't like other men – like the poor sinful tax collector humbly kneeling in the back of the room. That was Jesus commentary on that kind of hypocrisy. St. Luke says that Jesus told that parable "to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others." The problem is that we can't trust in ourselves. Trusting in ourselves will only land us on the doorstep of hell when it comes to eternity.

Instead, what we really need to do is take that harsh standard we're prone to applying to others and apply it to ourselves. St. Paul says, "If we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged" (1 Corinthians 11:31). If we applied it to ourselves we'd not only escape God's judgement, but we'd then be in a position to humbly and gently help the brother or sister with the speck in their eye, because we'd have first removed the log from our own – our own vision would be clearer.

And notice that that's what he tells us to do in verse 5:

You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

I've heard people say that Jesus point was basically to tell us to mind our own business. But that's not the case. Anyone who says that hasn't read all of verse 5. Jesus may forbid harsh and critical judgementalism, but he does so because our motive has to be one of love. And a person who is loving has a responsibility to his brother or sister. Remember that Jesus tells us in Matthew 18:15 that if our brother sins against us, our first duty (which is sadly often neglected) is to "go and tell him his fault, between you and

him alone.” We have the same duty here. There are times – like when we haven’t removed the big log from our own eye – that it isn’t our place to interfere or get involved, but that aside, Jesus commands us to confront our brothers and sisters so that they can be corrected. The key is that we need to deal with our own eye trouble first so that we can see clearly. Think about it: there’s a reason why we call a speck of dirt in the eye a “foreign body.” It doesn’t belong there. In fact, it’s usually painful and can be dangerous if it’s not removed. I once got a speck of something lodged under a contact lens. Instead of removing it, I rubbed it. It scratched my cornea in several places and the end result was an infection that almost cost me the sight in my right eye. So if our brother or sister does have something in their eye, we have an obligation to help them remove it – leaving it alone, letting it damage the eye isn’t an option.

Our duty as Christians, then, isn’t to *see the speck* in our brother’s eye while at the same time we *do not notice the log* in our own; and still less to *say* to our brother “*Let me take the speck out of your eye*” when we haven’t yet taken the log out of our own. Our duty is this: *first to take the log* out of our own eye, so that then with clear vision we’ll be able to *take the speck* out of our brother’s eye. You see, Jesus is *not* condemning criticism in general. He’s condemning the criticism of those who don’t first apply their own standard to themselves. Jesus isn’t condemning correction. He’s condemning the correction of others when we haven’t corrected ourselves. He’s condemning self-righteousness “correction,” which doesn’t really have correction as its goal in the first place.

John Chrysostom preached about how we are to confront our erring brothers and sisters saying, “Correct him, but not as a foe, nor as an adversary exacting a penalty, but as a physician providing medicines.”

And that’s just it. The physician isn’t out to treat you to prove he’s somehow better than you – he’s treating you because you’re sick and you need help. That’s why Jesus, the great physician and healer of souls came into this world – because we’re all spiritually sick. We’re all sinners and he came to bring redemption. That’s what we need to keep in front of

us: the Gospel itself. We’re people who know that one day there will be a judgement before God and that people will be punished for their sins. Our job on this earth isn’t to pretend we’re God, condemning them now. Our job is to do what we can, and do it lovingly, to help others see that if they don’t deal with their problem now, there’ll literally be hell to pay when the judge comes. Our mission is to help and heal and love, because Jesus has already helped and healed and loved us.

Think about this. Sin is a terrible thing – an offence against God. We ought to be offended by it as much as he is. And yet so often in our outrage we condemn the world with a self-righteous and judgemental attitude that forgets that while sin offends God’s great holiness, he loved the world enough to send his Son to die for it – to make a way to restore sinners to himself. When we’re judgemental we forget the Gospel message itself. We forget that Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. The world needs correction. The world needs to see its sin. And no one will ever come to Christ without first humbly acknowledging that he or she is a sinner. But we need to remember that while the Law condemns, God’s loving grace is here to save through Jesus Christ.

In closing let me ask: Was Jesus outraged by sin? Of course he was. But think about the fact that he came to show love and grace to those same people whose sin was so great an offence against him. We so often do less. We become self-righteous. We forget that we’re only redeemed because of Jesus – not because of our own merit – and we start to judge others. Sometimes we even forget that our mission is to share the Gospel. Instead we lash out in anger and in a way that would suggest that we’d rather see sinners rot in hell than be redeemed. We need to remember: But for the grace of God, there go I. Our calling is not to judge. Our calling is to help – lovingly and graciously – to let God’s love flow through us – to be like Jesus and to help people prepare to stand before God clothed in Christ’s righteousness. But we can’t do that until our own vision is clear and focused on Christ in the first place.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father and holy Judge, forgive us for the many

times that we take your role on ourselves. Forgive us for taking your grace for granted and for being self-righteous. Remind us, we ask, that our calling is to love and to share your grace with the world around us. Help us to deal with our own sins and give us a full understanding of your grace, that we might better be able to help others to deal with theirs. And remind us that our calling is a Gospel one – to lovingly assist – while we leave the judging to you. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.