

On Judgment

Matthew 7:1-6

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This morning we begin looking at the last chapter of the Sermon on the Mount. Our text is Matthew 7, verses 1-6. Jesus has already cut deep down into the recesses of our souls, into the secret wellspring of our (moral) lives. No to anger, no to lust, no to divorce, no to anxiety, no treasure on earth, no hatred, no cursing, no retaliation. No lawsuits. And today: no judgment. He's relentless. For he seeks our transformation, our being conformed to the splendor of his own image. The summons of the gospel is to nothing less than the perfection of our heavenly Father, manifested in the Son.

Now, any sober listener to the Sermon on the Mount to this point, should not feel much like judging others. That would be a sign of great hardness of heart. The gap between our own lives and the summons of Jesus should shatter us. But still, somehow, we manage to carry on with our anger, our hatred, our finger-pointing, our condescension.

And remember, Jesus has already addressed the fact that piety itself has built-in dangers. *Almsgiving, fasting, prayer – these very things can become the very ground for hypocrisy and self-righteousness.* So, it should come as no surprise then, that the very demands for righteousness placed on us by the Sermon on the Mount can, and do, lead to a judgmental spirit. We hear the call to holiness, we take it with utmost seriousness, and by God's grace we make some progress, often at excruciating cost. And then, we begin to compare, to look down our noses, to wonder about those others, those nominal, those not so committed, those compromised Christians.

So, human nature being the treacherous thing it is, whether you are hardened to the message of the Sermon on the Mount, keeping it at arm's length, or whether you heed the message of the Sermon on the Mount, soberly taking it to heart. In either case, the temptation to become a judge lurks. And our Lord knows that. Thus, this injunction. We shall make three points: Judging others in verses 1 and 2, correcting brothers in verses 3 through 5, and sharing with the hostile in v.6.

I. Judging Others

First, then, judging others. The text is famous, and often misused and cited out of context. Judge not, that you be not judged. To begin, let's say what this judging is not. It is clear from the context, not to mention the whole of Scripture, that it cannot mean, as Tolstoy took it, that we cannot set up law courts to judge. Societies need laws and judges, and Scripture not only acknowledges this, it views them as divinely appointed.

Second, judging cannot mean that we are to be blind, that we are to cease judging in the sense of discerning good from evil, in the sense of rightly discriminating or evaluating. Jesus judges a certain type of person in v.6 of our text, he passes judgment on false prophets later in v.15. He pronounces a series of woes on the Pharisees. And Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 18, how to judge in the exercise of church discipline. He says we can judge people by their fruits. In John 7, he tells his disciples to judge righteously.

The text here, itself, is a judgment against those who judge. Even refraining from judgment, is a form of discriminating judgment. In this wholesome sense, judgement (critical discernment) is an inescapable reality. So Judgment is good – even commanded. What is in view here, however, is a perverse and diseased form of judgment. One which unfairly, un-righteously – and hypocritically -- judges others. The text seeks to eliminate a harsh, fault-finding, critical spirit, which is quick to condemn others, which actively seeks and loves to expose failures, one which often puts the worst possible construction on the actions and motives of others.

Again, it's not evaluating or discerning which is the issue, its evaluating without generosity, it is engaging others in a way that is contrary to the law of love. In particular, this type of person likes to play the judge, and thus to pronounce upon the guilt of others. They assume a competence and an authority that they do not have, and they assume a posture of condemnation.

This aspect of *condemning* is brought out in the parallel passage from Luke 6 which says: Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not be condemn, and you will not be condemned. The person here assumes the role of God. They want to climb up on the bench, forgetting that they, too, are in the dock. Such a one, the text says, will BE judged – and it's implied – judged by God. It is dangerous for us to assume this posture, this perverse form of judgement.

As James says: There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you – who are you to judge your brother?

As Paul puts it in Romans 14: You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother (there we see the condemning contempt)? For, the apostle continues, we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

People who feel the need to take the role of judge are impatient, they are people who don't trust the coming eschatological judgment. We are not in the time when judgment unto condemnation is being meted out, and thus we must not assume the bench, which is why Paul can say:

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. Judgment, in the sense of a definitive judicial verdict over lives, lies in the future—stop grasping for it now.

Verse 2 expands on the judgment those who judge this way shall receive: For with the judgment you pronounce, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. The point here is that God will deal with this sort of judging person, one who wants justice for others – and everybody loves to see justice done on somebody – this person should not expect mercy at the judgement seat of Christ.

There is a kind of reciprocity here, by which, God will deal with us, as we have treated others. If we live by the grace of the gospel, we shall be judged by the same generous standard. If we refuse to forgive others, if we are narrow and critical of others, our heavenly Father will not forgive us. In the parable of the unfaithful servant in chapter 18, his condemnation stems from the way he, who had received mercy, treated his fellow slave without mercy. Judgment will be merciless to the one who has shown no mercy. What has been lost on this type of judge, is a living awareness that we are all objects of God's evaluation. And God's evaluation will be most gracious to the merciful, who, having shown mercy, shall receive mercy.

II. Correcting Brothers

That's judging others. Our second point is correcting brothers. Here we get something of a short parable illustrating the first point about judging. Verse 3: Why do you look at the speck (of sawdust) in your brother's eye and pay no attention to (do not notice) the plank in your own eye? The one judging here is not really concerned for their brother. Rather, as we said, there is an often-masked contempt. Under the mask of love – I'm just trying to help you, brother --- there often lies a pettiness, and a complete lack of proportion.

Proportion in life, and in responding to others, is so important. This one sees the small sins of others as very much in need of correction; and is totally blind to their own much greater sins. They exaggerate the failures of others; they minimize their own. They operate with a hypocritical double standard. Justice for you,

promiscuous mercy for me. This type of person sits in the sermon, and thinks, “so and so really NEEDS to hear this sermon.” And under the hypocrisy lies a complete – or at least a substantial – lack of self-awareness. We can walk around with planks in our eyes--- and insist that we should be the eye surgeons for our brethren. Totally desensitized to our own monstrous faults.

One thinks of David’s response to the parable Nathan told him, after his adultery and murder, where the rich man steals and kills the poor man’s little lamb. David, plank in eye, pronounces the death sentence on the rich man. And, of course, Nathan replies: YOU are the man!

Jesus continues: How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is a plank/log in your own eye?

Here again is that total lack of self-evaluation. Blinded surgeons should not be eager to operate. But robust self-awareness is painful, and it is hard to obtain. The eye, after all, cannot see the eye. And we are really bad at seeing ourselves in full. That is why unless we are under the Word, not over it as judge, under it, allowing it to criticize and undo us, to operate and pierce to the division of joint and marrow, to judge the thoughts and intents of our hearts, we are unfit to correct others.

And the sacrament of the table is given as well, Paul says, that we might judge ourselves strictly, that we might not BE CONDEMNED. But a person such as this, is not rigorously judging themselves -- either by the Word or at the Table. And of such, Jesus says, in v.5: You hypocrite. That is, you mask-wearer, you who hide yourself from yourself. First, take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

So, notice, judgement here is NOT forbidden. But it is NOT fault-finding arrogant judgment. It is the brotherly correction of one who has dealt robustly with their own sins first. Only *then*, with a deep solidarity in our common frailty, with a sense that WE are the chief of sinners, with fear and trembling, *then* will we have the clarity of eye necessary to address our brethren’s sins. Then we shall correct, in Chrysostom’s words, not as a foe, or as an adversary exacting a penalty, put as a physician providing medicine.

This kind of correction is outlined in Galatians 6: Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ. True correction is brotherly, sympathetic, and costly and gentle. It is willing to carry the load of the other’s struggle. It is willing to walk the long road of restoration, not merely issue edicts. Even biblical edicts. This is brotherly love that requires a rare combination of deep self-awareness and brokenness, and genuine, unselfish concern for others. And until we obtain it, until we come to the

THEN YOU WILL SEE CLEARLY in verse 5, we should refrain from assuming the role of the corrector of others.

III. Sharing with the Hostile

The third point is sharing with the hostile. And the idea here is that in our love, in our generosity toward others, we must still be discerning. Verse 6: Do not give dogs what is holy; do not throw your pearls to pigs. What is sacred, or holy, the highly prized pearls, as the rest of Matthew's gospel indicates, is the gospel of the kingdom – the kingdom which is itself the pearl of great price.

Dogs (ferocious scavengers, not domestic pets) and pigs, both unclean animals, were common insults, but here they are stark images for the hardened, for those who – if you will --- committed to their filth, animalistic in nature, are fixed in their hostility to the gospel. Both images – dogs and pigs – are used of false teachers in 2 Peter 2 which says: Of them the proverbs are true: "A dog returns to its vomit," and, "A sow that is washed returns to her wallowing in the mud."

The text, then, says that there are people – like this --- who you must not share the gospel with. To do so is essentially to invite contempt and blasphemy. As Proverbs 23:9 puts it: do not speak to a fool for he will scorn the wisdom of your words.

Aggressive evangelicals like to count the number of converts they make. What can't be counted is the number of people they have turned off. Or the number of times they allowed the holy things of God to be profaned or despised - in the language of the text, trampled under the feet of the hostile. Nor can we measure the hostility, the backlash against believers, when the viscous may, as the text concludes, turn on you and tear you to pieces.

This, of course, does not mean we don't vigorously preach the gospel. The whole NT teaches otherwise. Proclaiming the gospel to every creature is the default setting for the church. But it does mean that, with some people, we know when to stop. We are not to be judges, Spurgeon said, but we are also not to be simpletons. Because we are non-judgmental, does not mean we are indiscriminating.

Paul practiced just this discernment, when, on a number of different occasions he said that, because the Jews had hardened themselves, he was taking the gospel to the Gentiles. We need to know when to, as Jesus told his missionary disciples, shake the dust off our feet and move on to the next town.

This is hard for some, but we must learn to let the rejected Word be rejected. We cannot coerce or manipulate others, for something that has, in our case, been freely given. We are not the Holy Spirit. And attempting to be the Spirit can seem

noble, but it often leads to the truth being profaned, to the hardened being confirmed in their hardness, and to the church and the gospel being despised. As Augustine puts it: better to leave one to search for what is concealed, than to make them despise what is revealed.

So, this passage calls us to give up assuming the bench, the role of judge. It calls us to forsake hypocrisy and ignorance of our own state. To forsake perverse judgment. It seeks repentant, gentle, merciful evaluators and helpers of our fellow sinners in the body. People who would have the courage to pray: Judge me, O God, AS I have judged others. And as those who have chosen this way, the text calls us to share the holy treasure of the gospel, with discernment, knowing that the One who alone is the judge, who alone acquits and condemns, the One who takes the plank out of our eyes, alone can open the eyes of the hostile, to see clearly the glory of the pearl of great price. Amen.

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