

On Judging Others

Matthew 7:1-6

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Well, good morning. Despite appearances, I am Tobias. If you don't know what I'm talking about, ask someone else. I am the Associate Pastor here at Christ the King, and it's once again my privilege to get to open God's Word for us this morning. For the last several months, we've been making our way through Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. And if you were with us last week, you'll remember that we looked at Matthew 6:25-34, where Jesus told his disciples not to be anxious and to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. And if you've glanced ahead at this morning's passage, it wouldn't surprise me if its opening prohibition, "judge not," strikes you as abrupt and maybe even a bit disconnected from what we've been hearing. And while there's certainly an abrupt transition here, I actually think that it's connected to what Jesus has been preaching in a pretty clear way.

You see, throughout the sermon, Jesus has been teaching us as his disciples what it actually means to live out our calling as kingdom people. And so with his commands, like do not lust or retaliate, love your enemy, he's been filling out and he's been clarifying what he meant when he said toward the beginning of the sermon in Matthew 5:20, "for I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." And while I think we can assume that Jesus' disciples had a sincere desire to listen and to pursue this greater righteousness, they wanted to do this in obedience, we also need to remember that they were sinners. They were sinners just like you and me, and because of that, they were at times going to fail. And in light of this, it seems likely to me that at this point, Jesus sensed it was now time to give them an urgent warning against one very particular error they were going to be prone to fall into, judgmentalism. And so that's what he does, he rather abruptly turns to address it.

And so I invite you to open your copy of God's Word, if you haven't already, to chapter 7, and we'll be reading verses 1-6. He says this:

"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.

"Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you." (ESV)

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord. Let's pray.

Gracious and mighty God, we ask you for help. We pray that you by your Spirit will open our eyes and our ears to your Word and what it has to say to us. We confess our ignorance, our lack of wisdom, but you are the fount of all wisdom, and you offer it freely. And so we pray, Lord, now that you will instruct us by your Word. May your words go deep within us and transform us. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Well, I'm reminded of the heroine of Elizabeth Gaskell's brilliant story, *Wives and Daughters*. I'm reminded of the selfless and resilient Molly Gibson, who braced herself to endure hardship by likening it to tooth pulling and saying to her concerned Papa with stoic resolve, "It'll be over soon." You see, having heard the reading of our passage this morning, it wouldn't surprise me if some of you are already, like Molly, bracing yourself in your seats and saying, "oh boy, this is going to hurt." Friends, let me assure you that even if you were to get up right now and make for the door, I promise, I won't judge you. I had to do it. But in all seriousness, this passage is hard. It's a difficult passage to hear, and perhaps it's even painful. But I think it's actually vital medicine for us.

It's medicine for the weak and the ill. It's medicine for people like you and like me. And because of that, it's something that we need to listen to carefully and take to heart with gratitude as kingdom people. And yet, this passage is hardly used as medicine in our society today, is it? Instead, I think it's used more often than not as a weapon or maybe even like a countermeasure, a defense mechanism. After all, how many times have you heard someone say, or perhaps you've been the one to say it, "who do you think you are? What gives you the right to judge me? I mean, didn't Jesus himself say not to judge?" The commentator, Dan Doriani says that years ago, the best known scripture was John 3:16. But today, it's probably Matthew 7:1. And you know, I think he's probably right. And yet, there's a profound disconnect in the way our society has latched on to this verse, which he goes on to address. Listen to what he says. He says, "paradoxically, our airwaves and our personal conversations are laden with criticism and invective. Yet, we also claim to be opposed to judging others. We declare that no one should tell anyone else how to live and that no one should impose his or her standards on others. 'Judge not' is the sort of statement that our culture would eagerly embrace without bothering to discover precisely what Jesus meant by it. But was Jesus really opposed to all judging? Would Jesus condemn anyone who condemned others? Would Jesus let each man's conscience be his guide? The first step in discovering Jesus's intent is to put his teaching in its biblical context."

And so, friends, that's what I'd like for us to do this morning. I'd like for us to discover Jesus's intent in this passage, and in so doing, discover his message, discover that medicine that we desperately need. And I think the best way for us to do this is to look at what he says first in verses 1 through 5, and then turn our attention to verse 6. So let's take a look at verse 1 through 5. And as we begin, I want you to notice how it's structured. In verse 1, Jesus begins with the command, "judge not." In the second half of verse 1 through verse 4, he gives us reasons not to judge. And then in verse 5, he gives us another command followed by what we can expect as a result if we heed his teaching.

So, friends, what exactly does Jesus mean when he says judge not? What does he mean? Well, right off the bat, I think we can throw out the commonly held belief that Jesus is here forbidding his disciples making moral evaluations of behavior. After all, throughout the sermon up to this point, Jesus has been calling on his disciples to make precisely these sorts of judgments. He's called us to pursue a righteousness greater than the scribes and the Pharisees. He's called us to let our good works shine as lights before men. He's promised that those who do and teach the commandments of the law will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. And he's commanded us to forgive one another's trespasses. And if all these things don't require us as disciples to be able to make moral judgments of behavior, I don't know what does.

But if Jesus isn't forbidding making moral judgments, what is he forbidding? Well, as I've already mentioned, I think Jesus is now turning his attention to issue a warning against the danger of judgmentalism. In other words, he's warning his disciples against judging one another in a way that's harsh, even condemnatory and hypocritical. And I think we can see this if we pay attention to the two main reasons he gives for this prohibition. The first reason he gives begins in the second half of verse 1, and it goes through verse 2. Notice what he says there. He says, "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." Here Jesus is urging his disciples to consider the danger, the ultimate danger. And it's almost as if he were saying, "look guys, if you don't want to be condemned in the end by God, then don't condemn one another." Now it's important that we don't misunderstand what he's saying here. You see, I think it'd be easy for us to think that that Jesus is promoting a sort of transactional idea about salvation. An idea about salvation that says, if I do this, or in this case, if I don't do this, then my obedient behavior will win me a saving verdict rather than condemnation before God at his final judgment. But friends, that's not what Jesus is doing. Instead, what he's doing is calling us as disciples to reflect on how it is that we were made members of his kingdom in the first place. And in light of this, he's prohibiting a practice that, were we as disciples to embrace it, would reveal that we don't understand the Lord's gospel grace at all.

You see, as he's already made plain throughout the sermon, as kingdom people, we are to be the first people who extend mercy and forgiveness to our brothers and sisters, not condemnation. And that's because in turning to the Lord in repentance and faith, we recognize our own poverty of spirit, not our spiritual wealth. We recognize our own need for the Lord's grace, not our own righteousness. And what's more, it's because we recognize that God alone is judge, and the only one who is perfectly capable of pronouncing guilt. The commentator Michael Wilkins sums it up this way. He says, "to fall into a pattern of life in which we judge others is to show that we are not true members of the kingdom of heaven. Absolute judgment as a categorical pronouncement of the guilt of another person, as though this is the final word on a matter. At fault is a person who makes himself and his way of doing things and his opinion, the absolute standard. He or she has usurped the place of God, because only God can judge in this way." When disciples have developed this critical condemning attitude as a pattern of life, they have forced love out of their relationships with others. The kind of love that Jesus offers enables his disciples to give what is good to others, not to condemn them. If we don't have that love, but instead have vindictive condemnation in our hearts, we demonstrate that we really do not know God's mercy and forgiveness. That is a powerful statement.

There's a second reason why we shouldn't judge one another in this way, and it comes as Jesus goes on to give his famous illustration of the speck and the log in verses 3 and 4. So what is going on with this illustration? Well, we need to recognize that Jesus means this illustration to be shockingly ridiculous. I mean, here we have this guy with a log. Think a massive thing, like a roof beam or the mast of a ship. Here's this guy who has this in his eye, who not only thinks he can see the speck, or perhaps better, the tiny piece of dust in his brother's eye, but he actually thinks he's the one in the best position to remove the speck, and so he kindly and graciously offers to help him. It's a ludicrous scene. It'd be like Ebenezer Scrooge, that paragon of Christian compassion and generosity, coming to you, or better yet, coming to Bob Cratchit in self-deceived self-righteousness and exhorting him to have a bit more Christmas cheer and to help the needy.

Don't misunderstand what I'm saying. Unlike the character of Bob Cratchit, the man with the speck in his eye in Jesus's story clearly has a failing that needs attention, but he doesn't need the help of a log-eyed, self-appointed judge who, in his blindness, can't even see clearly enough to first remove the massive obstruction in his own eye. Such a man isn't help. He's a hypocrite. He's a play actor, which is what that means. In fact, this is exactly what Jesus calls him in the beginning of verse 5, "you hypocrite." Commentator, Tom Wright, captures the point this way. He says, "Jesus isn't ruling out the possibility that some people will eventually be able to help others to take specks of dust out of their eyes. He isn't saying that there is no such thing as public morality, but he is warning that the very people who seem most eager to tell others what to do, or more likely what not to do, are the people who should take a long look in the mirror before they begin." But you know, this is really hard for us, isn't it? We don't like looking at a mirror when it reveals our flaws. We'd rather turn away. We'd rather look at the flaws of others and point them out instead.

Mark Twain once rightly said, "nothing so needs reforming as other people's habits." Friends, how does that hit you? Maybe a little too close to home? Do you hear your own attitude in that sentiment? I assure you, you're not alone. Friends, we need to recognize that when our focus is on reforming other people's habits to the neglect of first tending to our own spiritual need of reformation, we are falling prey to the hypocritical judgmentalism that Jesus is here denouncing. Michael Wilkins puts it this way. He says, "here Jesus calls the disciple to examine himself or herself. He must seek God to bring forgiveness and spiritual healing to himself before he can in any way even know what is wrong with others. When the disciple removes the plank of self-righteousness, she is then able to see with eyes of humility the speck that other brothers or sisters may have. A mark of the discipleship community is the responsibility that disciples have to help each other remove the speck of sin from each other's lives, but it must come from a humble and self-examined life that has removed the plank of self-righteous judgment."

Well, having looked at verses 1-5, let's turn our attention to verse 6 in the time we have remaining. Notice what Jesus says there. He says, "do not give dogs what is holy and do not throw your pearls before pigs lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you." Now it wouldn't surprise me if some of you are scratching your heads at this. After all, Jesus has just spent five verses telling his disciples not to judge, but now he seems to be encouraging it. I mean, how are we supposed to identify who are the dogs and pigs without judgment, right? And on top of this, Jesus doesn't explain what is holy or what the pearls are. He doesn't explain them. So what are we to make of this? How does it fit in with the rest of the passage?

Well, some scholars have suggested that we need to take Jesus's statement here as sarcasm, and therefore simply as a final, if not colorful, warning against being judgmental. Almost as if you were saying, "listen hypocrite, if you view your criticisms as pearls of wisdom and toss them at those whom you consider to be swine and dogs, those swine will trample your wisdom and those dogs will perceive your attitude and turn to attack you." Sarcastic. And while I'm somewhat sympathetic to this view, the main problem I have with it is that it's just too subtle for me. And I have a hard time believing that Jesus's hearers would have caught the subtlety and connected the dots. I also don't think resorting to such a reading is necessary for us to make sense of what he's saying.

Others have suggested that what Jesus is doing here is limiting the scope of the gospel mission at this time to the Jews. And there's something to this. After all, for the Jews of the day, dogs and pigs were common slurs for Gentiles and Romans. And Jesus himself seems to

explicitly limit his disciples' initial missionary endeavor to the Jews. For example, in Matthew 10:5-6, Matthew writes this. He says, "these 12 Jesus sent out, instructing them, go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." So he's limiting the mission for this time to the Jews. But I have several problems with this view. First, there's no hint, there's no other hint in our present context that suggests to me that Jesus has now shifted his focus onto giving advice on how to prioritize the gospel mission along ethnic lines.

Second, I have a hard time thinking that Jesus would refer to non-Jews with the ethnic slurs dogs and pigs. And finally, I think Jesus's own actions in the gospel undermine such a view. After all, it's just in the next chapter of this gospel that we see Jesus do what? We see him heal the Roman centurion's servant and commend this man for his faith, saying, truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. But if these suggestions miss the mark, how are we to understand Jesus's point here? Well, here's what I think is going on. I think he's giving us, as disciples, a sort of last resort advice on how to proceed with an obstinate individual after verse 5 has taken place. Here's what I mean.

I think he's assuming several things, okay? I think he's assuming that the hypocrite in verses 1 through 5, I think he's taken that log out. I think he's listened to Jesus's advice, he's taken the log out, and now he sees clearly and he's in a position to approach his brother with help. I think Jesus is assuming that the guy with the speck in his eye still has that speck and it needs attention. I think Jesus is assuming that this speck-eyed man is refusing to listen to the man who is offering help. He is refusing it. He's refusing to turn to the Lord in repentance and faith, and so he's showing himself to be not a brother in the gospel, but an enemy to it.

He's sort of like the dogs and pigs that Peter rebukes in 2 Peter chapter 2:22. And I also think Jesus is assuming that we as disciples have an obligation to treasure and guard the gospel of his kingdom and its message of repentance and forgiveness as something that's holy and as something that is as precious to us as a pearl of great price. And so in all of this, what I think Jesus is doing here in verse 6 is balancing his prohibition against hypocritical judgmentalism with a call for us to exercise wise spiritual judgment when faced with someone who shows nothing but repeated contempt for the gospel. He's calling us to protect the preciousness of the gospel rather than to continually cast it before the feet of those who in their stubborn pride would do nothing but trample it or turn to attack us. In other words, I think Jesus is saying that there comes a time when it's best for the sake of the gospel to move on. And if this seems particularly harsh to you, let me remind you of the instructions Jesus gave his disciples in Matthew 10, verses 14 and 15 before sending them out.

He said, and if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town. Let me remind you of how Paul handed over the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5 and Hymenaeus and Alexander in 1 Timothy 1. He handed them over to Satan. But friends, let me say this as well. I don't think it's Jesus's point here to motivate you and me to earnestly try to find situations where we as individual Christians can apply verse 6. It's a last resort and it should involve the collective prayerful wisdom of the community. Nor do I think we should regard what is done in verse 6 as a final word of condemnation.

Remember, Paul himself handed over the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5. He handed over Hymenaeus and Alexander. Why? So that they might repent. In many ways, I think we can

see what's going on in the transition from verse 5 to verse 6 as foreshadowing that procedure of confronting a brother in sin that we find in Matthew 18. It's something to reflect on. Even in following verse 5, friends, our ultimate desire ought to be the restoration of a wayward sinner and we ought to be supremely long-suffering and patient. The English Puritan, Richard Baxter, commenting on verse 6, he put it this way. Listen to what he says. He says, "the worse such persons are, the sadder is their case and the more to be pitied and the more diligent should we be for their recovery. Before we give them over, let us try the utmost that we may have the experience of their obstinate contempt. To warrant our forsaking them, charity beareth and waiteth long."

Friends, these are sobering words, aren't they? Sobering perhaps most of all because if we're honest with ourselves, we know our own weakness. We know how quickly we can become either the hypocritical judge or the trigger happy one. The one eager to leave a brother or sister behind rather than to bear with them impatient love. And in light of this sobering truth, perhaps you will find consolation like I do in knowing that as Jesus continues in the next passage, he's going to turn his attention to address our dependency upon him in prayer. Brothers and sisters, as we seek to heed our Lord's instruction, may we be a people characterized by humility, not judgment. And may we be a people eager to extend mercy and forgiveness and willing to bear one another's burdens and thus to fulfill the law of Christ. Let's pray.

Almighty God, Oh Father, we bow before you. We thank you for your Word. We recognize that sometimes your Word is difficult for us to hear and yet, it is medicine to our souls. We ask, Lord, that we would be a self-reflective people. A people who are familiar with our own poverty of spirit and our need of your saving grace. Father, keep us from judgementalism. And may we exercise discernment in the power of the spirit. We pray all of these in precious name of Jesus, Amen.