

“Do Not Judge”

MATTHEW 7:1-5

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As we look at a sermon request that has been turned in by one of our members, this morning I would like for us to study what is possibly the most abused verse in the entire Bible. In some ways, it is probably the world's favorite verse. People may hate Christianity, they may reject the Bible as being the inspired word of God, they might ridicule some of the most basic Bible concepts, but they love to quote this verse. And really, what I find interesting is to hear people who don't love Jesus quoting Jesus. Of course, when people who don't love Jesus quote Jesus, they usually get it wrong, and that is certainly true of the widely misunderstood verse that we are about to consider this morning. It is a verse that has been used as a defense for nearly every type of sin we could possibly imagine. I would like for us to turn to this verse together – you might want to hang on to your pews as we look at it, since it is so dangerous – but it is found in Matthew 7. It is a statement from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (p. 1510). I am referring, of course, to that statement made by the Lord himself in Matthew 7:1, ***“Do not judge so that you will not be judged.”*** Most of us have probably heard that verse quoted – perhaps more often by those who are hostile to the Christian faith. And it is certainly obvious why this verse has been so abused through the years. In our modern and enlightened society, it is popular to be completely tolerant of practically everything, and I say “practically” everything for a reason. Those who believe that judging is wrong will immediately condemn anyone they perceive to have made any kind of judgment! So, we might say that those who condemn judging have become judges themselves! But that is how this verse is often used. We might share what the Bible says on any kind of moral topic – you know, marriage is between a man and a woman, abortion is wrong, adultery is a sin, or any number of topics – and someone always seems to bring up some variation of what the Lord said here, “Well, you know, Jesus said, ‘Don't judge!’” as if that wipes away anything Jesus ever said on any other subject.

Maybe you have heard Steve Martin's take on this passage, “Never judge a man unless you've walked a mile in his shoes. Then you'll be a mile away...and you have his shoes.” Steve Martin is a very wise man! This morning, though, so that we can come to a proper understanding of what the Lord meant in this passage, I would like for us to study the statement in its context. In other words, let us not just look at the verse itself, but let us consider the verses around it. Yes, if the Lord only said ***“Do not judge,”*** then some of the people who take this verse out of context might have a point, but as most of us know, you can learn a lot about a verse by looking at the verses around it.

Was Jesus saying that Christians should never have an opinion on anything or that they should never share their views on any Bible subject? Was the Lord saying that we should just quietly accept everything that our culture teaches? Was the Lord saying that we should just view all religious opinions as equally valid and that we should just keep our mouths shut? Was the Lord teaching that when we see a fellow Christian caught up in sin that we should just ignore it? As we come to a proper understanding of what the Lord was saying here, I would invite you to look with me at the first five verses of Matthew 7 – Matthew 7:1-5,

¹ Do not judge so that you will not be judged. ² For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. ³ Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," and behold, the log is in your own eye? 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.

Again, as we look back over this little paragraph, I would like for us to learn some lessons on judging. What does the Lord want us to get out of this passage? What does this passage really mean for us today?

- I. **With that in mind, I would like for us to notice first of all, that when it comes to making any kind of judgment, we are to start by LOOKING AT OURSELVES FIRST.**

We see the Lord's rather funny illustration of this in verses 3-5 as the Lord tells us about a man with a log in his eye who is trying to remove a speck from his brother's eye. The word translated here as "**log**" literally refers to something that holds up something else, so it is the idea of a joist, a beam in a house or a building that goes from one side to the other, from wall to wall, and is used to support a floor or a ceiling. Here in this building we have what I assume is a steel beam going from the front of this building to the back. Downstairs you can see the steel posts supporting that beam. The kids love to swing around those. But this huge beam is the main support of this building. Other joists then rest on this central beam and go out to the sides. That's the kind of "**log**" or "**beam**" that the Lord is talking about here – a giant piece of wood that supports the entire building.

So, one guy has this giant house-supporting log sticking out of his eye, and yet this man is far more concerned about the little speck, the little piece of sawdust, in his brother's eye. And I would point out: This is not to minimize the pain of having a piece of sawdust in your eye. Like some of you, I have been to the hospital because of a piece of sawdust. When it gets in the wrong spot, it can be incredibly painful. It can cause permanent damage. It is serious. And let us not forget: The Lord most likely had some first-hand experience with this! Jesus was trained as a carpenter. In fact, the Lord worked as a carpenter until the age of 30 when he started preaching. And I would seriously doubt that the Lord wore any goggles. He didn't have OSHA looking over his shoulder making sure he had the eye protection on. So, in no way was the Lord minimizing the pain of getting a speck in your eye, but the Lord is painting a vivid mental image here – the one who is so concerned about the speck in his brother's eye has failed to see this ginormous log or joist sticking out of his own eye.

I am reminded of the man who watches a football game from the comfort of his Lay-Z-Boy who will scream and shout at his TV about the poor performance of the quarterback. He will criticize the receivers. He will criticize the linemen. And yet we wonder: If he is so good at knowing what to do, then why is he laid out in a chair eating pizza instead of being out there on the field playing the game? It's like the drunken fan in the stands who thinks he is in a much better position to judge a call than the umpire behind home plate. We understand that it is much easier to criticize than it is to actually do something, and that is the critical spirit the

Lord is warning about here. I have a friend who has spent some time preaching in northern Tanzania and southwestern Kenya, and in that part of the world they have an interesting little proverb, and very roughly translated, the proverb is, “Chimpanzees laugh at each other’s tail.” Very interesting! And the idea is: It is very easy for us to look for and criticize the mistakes of others while forgetting our own mistakes. We can look at our friends, and we see some of the horrible decisions they make as parents. We look at our friends, and we can see some of their terrible financial decisions. We look at our friends, and we may be amazed at some of their moral weakness. These things are so easy for us to see, and yet in reality we are like chimpanzees laughing at each other’s tails.

When it comes to judging, then, the solution is to look at ourselves first. Notice: The Lord does not downplay the importance of removing specks. When most people use the phrase, “Don’t judge me,” they usually mean, “Leave my speck alone!” But that is not the Lord’s conclusion here, is it? Instead, if we look at this verse in context, we find the preferred solution 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.”*** The Lord, then, was not telling us to just mind our own business, but rather, he was giving us the responsibility of helping our brother. As Christians, what is the loving, compassionate thing to do when a brother has a speck in his eye? Do we just walk away? Oh, wow, that’s a speck that must be painful? Do we walk away from that? No, but rather, the only compassionate thing to do is to remove the speck. So, when it comes to judging, we don’t just ignore sin, but we have to start by looking at ourselves first.

II. There is a second idea concerning judging in this passage, and that is: WE MUST BE EXTREMELY CAREFUL TO HAVE THE RIGHT ATTITUDE IN THE JUDGMENTS THAT WE MAKE.

We see this in verse 2, where Jesus said, ***“For in the way you judge, you will be judged.”*** In other words, we are to judge others with the same attitude with which we ourselves would want to be judged – an idea summarized in the Golden Rule just a few verses later, down in verse 12, ***“In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”*** When we need to make some kind of judgment, then, we need to try to put ourselves in the other person’s place. I know that when I need to be corrected, I really want it to be done in a loving way – not harshly, come to me personally, don’t go talking to everybody but me about it. So Jesus is saying here, then, that before we judge someone, we need to put ourselves in that person’s place and we need to ask ourselves how we would want to be treated: If I were on the other end of what I am about to say, how would I take it? And with that in mind, we may need to change or adjust our attitude in delivering that judgment.

A big part of this would involve looking for the best in people. We need to give people the benefit of the doubt until we are proven wrong. And then, we are not to be surprised or shocked if the other person actually changes. Years ago I read the story about a man’s wife who complained for years about her husband leaving the cap off of the toothpaste. Finally, on the night before their 25th wedding anniversary, he decided it was about time to please her, so from then on, he started putting the cap back on the tube. After a week of this, the wife looked at him very suspiciously and said, “How come you’ve stopped brushing your teeth?” So, she was obviously not looking for the best in her husband.

Another danger with the attitude here would be jumping to conclusions, perhaps by judging only by some kind of outward appearance. Years ago when I was working on a graduate degree in corporate-public communication, I took an entire class on non-verbal communication, and in that class, we learned that when someone has their arms folded, it is a sign of hostility – it is a sign that they want to bring the conversation to an end. That may be a general rule, it might be supported by a lot of research, but sometimes people fold their

arms because they are cold! In communication theory, there is an old proverb that says, “Words do not have meaning, people have meaning.” In other words, if we are in doubt, we need to ask someone to clarify something before we make a final judgment.

There is also a lot to be said here for our own demeanor. If we find ourselves needing to correct another person, we can learn a lot from how the Lord did it. When it came to religious hypocrites, the Lord was incredibly straightforward, almost to the point of being brutal. On at least two occasions, he used physical violence. Sometimes he called people names – to their faces, he described the hypocrites as blind guides leading the blind, whitewashed tombs, and so on. But when it came to regular people caught up in sin, the Lord was incredibly patient and compassionate. We think of the woman caught in the act of adultery in John 8. He shielded that woman, and then he said, **“Go. From now on sin no more”** (John 8:11). He certainly was not soft on sin, but he had a way of correcting people with a gentle attitude. What a powerful example for us to follow! As he says here in Matthew 7, we are to be careful, **“For in the way you judge, you will be judged.”**

III. **There is a final idea we need to consider here, and that is: When we judge, WE MUST USE THE PROPER STANDARD OF JUDGMENT.**

We see in the rest of verse 2, **“...and by your standard of measure, it shall be measured to you.”** In a sense, the Lord is still talking about our attitude, but it seems that there may also be something deeper here. On the Judgment Day, since we will be judged by the word of God, then doesn't it make sense to judge ourselves (and those around us) by the word of God...before the Judgment Day gets here? When we look at it this way, we start to understand that judging itself is not condemned, but it is the abuse of judging that the Lord is condemning here. In other words, if I use my opinion to correct somebody, if I'm just out to whack everybody who doesn't agree with my opinion, then I have done wrong, because my opinion doesn't really matter. On the other hand, if I apply the word of God to my own life first, then it seems that I have God's permission (and even a mandate) to then turn around and try to help others as well.

Let's picture it this way: Let's try to picture someone in the habit of sinning. One person might say, “I can't judge; therefore that person is okay.” And someone else might say, “No, actually, that person is doing something contrary to God's word and needs to change.” Both statements could be called “judgmental.” Both statements have made a judgment, and yet the statements themselves are not really important. What really matters is the person's behavior and how it either does or doesn't match up with the word of God. We need to remember what the Lord said in John 7:24, where he said that we are to **“judge with righteous judgment.”** In that context, the Lord actually commanded judging, but the command was given with a warning – our judgment must be **“righteous,”** our judgment has to match up with the word of God. As we have learned this morning, we have to look at ourselves first, we must have the right attitude, and we have to use the proper standard. An improper standard would involve basing our judgment on human opinion. Paul warned about this in Colossians 2:8, where he said, **“See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.”** The traditions of men are deceptive. The traditions of men change over time, and oftentimes traditions are wrong. What is accepted today might be considered sin tomorrow, and what is condemned today might be accepted ten years from now. Using tradition, then, is an example of using an improper standard.

For an illustration of righteous judgment, we only need to look down a few more verses in Matthew 7. Just a few verses later, in Matthew 7:15-20, the Lord said,

¹⁵ Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? ¹⁷ So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 So then, you will know them by their fruits.

Unless I have missed something here, it appears that the Lord is telling us to be fruit-inspectors. As Christians, we have a responsibility to look at what people do, we compare that behavior to the word of God, and then we have to make a judgment, we need to come to a decision concerning what to do next. As we judge, then, we must use the proper standard – the proper standard with the appropriate attitude. As James said in James 2:12-13, ***“So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.”***

Conclusion:

As we close our thoughts on this idea that we are not to judge, I would like for us to think for at least a few minutes about the most unjust judgment ever made. The Lord Jesus was the perfect man, without sin, and yet he was arrested and taken before a Roman governor. After a lengthy examination, and after considering all of the evidence, three times that governor declared that Jesus was innocent. And yet we know what happened next. In order to please the people, Governor Pilate ordered that Jesus be crucified. The Lord, then, was crucified in our place, he was buried in our place, and he was resurrected in our place. At this point, then, we face a decision; we need to make a judgment (so to speak). What do we say about this? What do we do about this? The Bible explains that we accept the Lord's free offer of salvation by believing in Jesus, by turning away from our sins, by confessing that Jesus is the Son of God, and by allowing ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism. If you have never done these things, we would invite you to make that decision, to make that commitment this morning. If you would like to discuss it further, let us know. If you have something we need to pray about as a congregation, we would invite you to write it down and bring it to the front. We would be glad to go to God on your behalf. There is a time coming when every single one of us will appear before God as our Judge. As our Judge, he knows everything. He is not prejudiced by race, or wealth, or social status. He cannot be purchased with a bribe. He cannot be threatened. He knows exactly what we have done. He knows every thought we've ever had. He sees everything fairly and clearly and without bias of any kind. Above all, he has already allowed his son to take the punishment for what we deserve. Paul referred to the coming judgment in 2 Corinthians 5:10, ***“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”*** If you are ready for that day, great! But if we can help you in some way, we hope you will let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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