

Sawdust or Ceiling Beam?

^{NRS} **Matthew 7:1-6** "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ² For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. ³ Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while 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 neighbor's eye. ⁶ "Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.

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"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ² For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get." If we would just allow ourselves to take those two verses out of context, it'd be fantastic. Then we could interpret them this way: It's obvious that we are not supposed to make any decisions about what is right or wrong. We must never criticize anybody else. If we'll just let everybody do whatever they want, then we can do whatever we want – and God won't hold it against us. If we never criticize anybody, then God won't hold us accountable for our actions and our thoughts. It sounds pretty good, almost too good to be true! And that's exactly the case: it's too good to be true. God's will for our lives is more nuanced than that. This passage doesn't relieve us of the need to know right from wrong, nor does it wipe out our responsibility to use wise discernment in dealing with life's complicated problems. But it is about how we treat other people, like so much of the Sermon on the Mount. This passage is about those quick, overly simple, ill-considered judgments we make about other people without any love in our heart. This passage is about the subtle sins of a poisonous tongue.

We know how the love of money, fame, or power can distract us from the kingdom of heaven, but the ironic thing is that falling in love with our own moral certainty can do the same thing. Every group seems to have its own moral watchdogs, those faultfinders that are quick to point a finger of judgment at other people. "Judgmentalism is a social sin; it is the habit of constantly finding fault with what others say and do. It is a disease of the spirit."¹

Why do some people act in such judgmental ways? There are two common reasons. First, it's easier to look at our neighbor's faults - and by spending our time that way, we can avoid looking at our own failures. So long as we spend our energy fighting and condemning the evil we see elsewhere, we have little energy left to examine our own lives. Besides, it feels pretty virtuous to wage battle against evil. There are whole congregations that find some action that (a) they are certain that is evil, and (b) no one in the congregation is guilty of, and so (c) they unite in a crusade against that evil in the world. Not much will fire people up and unite them like a righteous crusade against some evil that other people are committing. Over the last century, congregations, and even whole denominations, have united to stamp out smoking, drinking, wearing makeup, evolution, Hollywood movies, birth control, euthanasia, marriage across ethnic lines, and the list goes on and on. Any of us might find some of those issues sinful - and others we might not think were evil. But, if no one in your congregation seems to be engaging in some behavior that can be characterized as sinful, then some wonderful things happen. First, there's no dissention among you because nobody is committing this evil. Nobody in your group is criticized or looked down on. Second, it feels so good to be fighting for godliness and righteousness. Nothing makes you feel so virtuous as a holy campaign. Third, this holy work leaves no time to wonder if you have any faults. And, should you have any nagging guilt over something else, you can calm yourself by remembering that at least you don't wear makeup or use birth control or drink alcohol or whatever the crusade is against.

A second reason for being judgmental is that one can use it to cover up their very own guilt in whatever they are being judgmental about. After all, the best defense is a strong offense. The more someone condemns some particular behavior, the less likely it is anyone will suspect them of that same behavior. Those who frequently lie can be very suspicious that others are lying to them, and they'll be very critical of liars. There have been ministers who ranted and railed about sexual sin - who have later been found guilty of sexual misconduct. Paul wrote to the church in Rome about this very sort of thing. He said, ^{NRS} **Romans 2:1** "You

have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.”

Just like revenge breeds revenge, condemnation brings condemnation. For instance, we can all remember people who would loudly condemn the use of drugs, but when their own use of drugs was exposed, public condemnation of them was huge. Condemnation brings condemnation - but love brings love in response. Think back over the first two chapters of the Sermon on the Mount. Remember all of the loving things that Jesus has admonished us to do. ^{NRS} **Matthew 5:7** "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." ^{NRS} **Matthew 6:14** "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you;" Today's passage picks up the themes of mercy and forgiveness - and carries that line of thought to the next level. When we read this text about judging it's helpful to place it with all the other teachings that flow from the command to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. So, here today we have a warning against self-righteousness and the severity and hypocrisy that come with it.

Jesus drives his point home with another one of his humorous exaggerations that give us unforgettable mental pictures. He asks us how it is that we can be so quick to spot a tiny piece of sawdust in someone else's eye - and yet we ignore the timber, the log, the ceiling beam in our own eye. Some folks enjoy the role of reformer, eagerly working to reform the behavior of those around them. "The reformer is intent on the sins of his neighbors, the saint is concerned about his own sins. The beam which is in the eye of most of us is lack of love."²

"Jesus requires that before we call for the transformation of someone else, we ourselves are to be transformed. In the kingdom of heaven, your standards of judgment must be transformed; therefore do not judge *until . . .*"³ you have worked to change yourself. If we look for the wrong in our self before we put someone else under the ethical spotlight, we'll move from self-righteousness to compassion. Only then can we deal with a neighbor's wrong. Instead of poking our finger in their face, we can reach out with mercy to wipe out their eye.

Think about it: those who have been down the same path and have changed, those who have first worked on their own transformation, those are the people who can be of the most use to someone else. In my study across the hall hangs a painting, given to me by the artist. His name was Richard Richards. He learned to paint while serving time in Leavenworth. When he got out of prison, he and another ex-con started a program for others who had served their time. In Texas, like most states, three out of four people who have served time end up back in prison within a few years. Richard and his friend, Sonny, founded New Directions. Of those who went through that program after being released from prison, fewer than three percent were incarcerated later. I keep the painting to remind me of a man who was my friend when I needed a friend badly. I keep it to remember that people who have done bad things can also have beauty and artistry within them. I keep it to remember that those who can best help someone with sawdust in their eye are those who have first taken the ceiling timber out of their own eye.

Today's teaching isn't a command to be neutral regarding all moral and ethical issues. We're to discern right from wrong, discern God's wisdom from our folly, and discern that which is best from that which is easy. Discernment helps us stay on the path following Jesus. Discernment is the tracking ability that helps us spot the footprints of our Lord. We are commanded to do some difficult things, some hard things. But we're to be gentle with each other. Have mercy on each other. Forgive one another in the same way we want to be forgiven. And when a brother or sister needs guidance and correction, it is best done by disciples who are very aware of both their own failures - and of God's forgiveness. "After God has dealt so graciously with our [many] shortcomings, how can we dare to treat others in . . . a mean-spirited fashion!"⁴ Jesus calls us to a higher righteousness, higher than that of the Scribes and Pharisees, the righteousness of the kingdom of God, and that involves avoiding our tendency to judge others more harshly than we judge ourselves.

We are to judge issues and actions. That's called discernment. But we must be very reluctant to pass judgment on other people. If we judge others we're putting ourselves in God's place, for only God is qualified to weigh the hearts, the circumstances, and the actions of people. In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul reminds us that only God has sufficient understanding, knowledge and wisdom to make wise judgments. Paul writes, "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 commendation from God." (1 Corinthians 4:5) Like Jesus said, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged."

The last verse under consideration today is another one of those colorful expressions from our Lord that seem to become stuck in our head. Don't give what is holy to the dogs. Don't throw pearls to swine. We might miss just how emphatic this command is unless we understand that most dogs in those days weren't friendly house pets. They were scavengers and to call someone a dog was an insult. Even more insulting was to refer to somebody as swine, an unclean, inedible animal under Jewish dietary law.

Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus told us to beware of practicing our piety in front of other people. We're told to avoid making a display of our giving and our praying. In this colorful saying about pearls and swine, Jesus is continuing that theme. "Just as religious acts are not done for self-advertising, so religious teaching is appropriate only in the presence of those who are ready to appreciate it."⁵ Do those who stand on the street corner and shout scripture or wave provocative religious messages attract more people than they drive away? How do most people react when someone hands them a tract that tells them that they're going to hell if they don't change their ways? Doesn't that sort of casting pearls to those who haven't asked for them leave a lot of passersby with the impression that Christians are judgmental? Maybe I'm missing something, but I've never noticed anyone pulling their car over and asking somebody holding up a sign on the street corner to tell them more about Jesus and how one can come to live in the kingdom that he announced. I've seldom seen anybody read a tract that they've been handed - and I've never seen anybody walk back to say, "Wow! This is great! Tell me more!"

Brothers and sisters, Jesus admonishes us to offer his message rather than trying to force feed it. He invites us to discern God's will on issues, but not to be judgmental of people. In living this way, we do to others as we would ourselves like to be treated. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

^{RS} **Matthew 6:1-8** "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ² "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁵ "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁷ "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

^{NRS} **Matthew 6:16-18** "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹ Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew, Interpretation Series* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1993) p 76

² George A. Buttrick, *The Gospel According to Matthew, I.B.* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1951) p 326

³ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew, WBC* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox 1997) p77

⁴ Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew, Interpretation Series* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1993) p 77

⁵ Sherman E. Johnson, *The Gospel According to Matthew, I.B.* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1951) p 326