

Judging Others

I read an interesting quote in preparing for this sermon on Jesus' words at the beginning of Matthew 7, part of His "Sermon on the Mount". The quote, which has no known author, runs like this:

Before you judge someone, walk a mile in their shoes. Then, when you do, you'll be a mile away and you'll have their shoes."

The following is an excerpt from the Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho. He wrote:

A young couple moved into a new neighbourhood. The next morning while they were eating breakfast, the young woman saw her neighbour hanging the washing outside. "That laundry is not very clean; she doesn't know how to wash correctly. Perhaps she needs better laundry soap." Her husband looked on, remaining silent. Every time her neighbour hung her washing out to dry, the young woman made the same comments.

A month later the woman was surprised to see a nice clean wash on the line and said to her husband, "Look, she's finally learned how to wash correctly. I wonder who taught her this." The husband replied, "I got up early this morning and cleaned our windows."

In almost every article I read about the judgments we make about other people, the author said that our negative opinions of others are always telling us something about ourselves. We judge the person who is successful because we wish we could have been more successful. We judge the person who is fit or abounding in energy because we feel we have failed in our own goals towards fitness and vibrant health. We judge the person who is always happy as being perhaps a tad shallow, because we envy their sense of well-being and feel, strongly, our lack of that same sense of happiness with our own life. Often the things we judge most harshly in others reflect fears that we have about our own performance, or our own ability to live up to expectations we have for ourselves.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Christian pastor who was a Christian martyr in Germany during the Second World War, said that one of the first signs of Christian maturity was a frustration with the hypocrisy of the church and a desire to separate from it. But the *next* sign of growth was to recognize that the same hypocrisy that we are repelled by in the church is present in us and must influence the way we interact with others, especially those we are trying to help to grow towards maturity in Christ. In other words, we need to be alert to what's going on inside us, and what's spilling out from us in words and actions. If we can recognize our own weaknesses and learn to deal with them in a healthy way, we are much less likely to judge the weaknesses we see in others.

Now, let's turn to our passage for this week:

Stop judging others, and you will not be judged. For others will treat you as you treat them. Whatever measure you use in judging others, it will be used to measure how you are judged. And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own?

How can you think of saying, 'Friend, let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye', when you can't see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log from your own eye, then perhaps you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye.

Don't give what is holy to unholy people. Don't give pearls to swine! They will trample the pearls, then turn and attack you. (Matthew 7:1-6)

If you're paying close attention, you might ask the question, "How do I know who "unholy people" are, if I refuse to judge anyone? How do I separate pigs from prophets if I'm not allowed to make any judgments about other people? Obviously, it's very important that we know the difference between judging people in the way Jesus describes in the first five verses, with the kind of judgment that is required in verse 6, so let's begin with that.

When Jesus opens this section with the words, "Judge not", is He saying that we should not exercise any discretion, any critical thinking at all; that we should be totally accepting of whatever ways others choose to speak or to act? This is clearly not the case, not only from the example that we see in verse 6 of giving what is holy to unholy people, but also from the example in verse 15:

Beware of false prophets who come disguised as harmless sheep, but are really wolves that will tear you apart.

Clearly He is calling us to make critical judgments about the people who will come into the church and are to restrict the influence of those who have an evil agenda for the people of our community of faith. Everywhere we look at Jesus in action, we see someone with strong, bold opinions. And we see Him acting on those convictions with confidence and even forcefulness. Jesus was not a Teacher who was bland and accepting of everyone's opinion; He knew what the Father wanted and He confronted the religious leaders of His day with the truth of the Kingdom of God.

What He is opposing in this verse is a hypocritical and condemning stance towards others. Why do I say hypocritical? Because Jesus was opposing the Pharisees and teachers of the law who were forever making judgments about people who didn't follow their long and onerous rule book. But, at the same time, they were making allowances for themselves to get around the clear teaching of the law for their own personal advantage. Their judgments of others were condemning judgments. They were harsh, lacking in charity and they were one-sided, lacking in truth.

When Jesus says, "Stop judging others, and you will not be judged", He is speaking about how we approach people with whom we might have a disagreement. Because He goes right on from there to say that others will treat you in the same way that you are treating them. In the NIV it says, "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you." So, if you are harsh, condemning, hypocritical and demeaning towards others, you should expect that those others will treat you with the same lack of respect and consideration. If you come across as the self-righteous know-it-all and tell someone that you think their actions are contemptible or that their opinions are idiotic, you're setting yourself up as their ultimate judge, and that's not your role. God has not

qualified you to pass judgment on the rest of humanity, but He has given you an ability to discern what words and actions are godly and admirable.

And when He puts you in the position to offer correction to someone who is mistaken, He tells you to do so humbly and with eyes wide open to your own faults and frailties. Here's the next bit:

*Why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own?
How can you think of saying, 'Friend, let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye', when you can't see past the log in your own eye?*

Well, how can you think of saying, "Here, let me give you a hand with this little problem you're having", when your own problems are massive by comparison? Why would you? What would prompt you to take the position of someone's advisor when you can't even understand what got them there? I think Jesus was probably talking especially to the Pharisees here, but the question is appropriate to all of us. Why do we think we have that right or authority? Because we're insecure, proud, self-righteous and so experienced at making excuses for ourselves that we have come to believe them - so we feel justified in helping others whose problems seem so obvious to us. It is interesting that others' failures seem more obvious than our own. I hope that isn't always true, and I hope we're mostly more self-aware than what this passage indicates, but Jesus is laying this out for us in no uncertain terms. He says that we can see the issues in other people's lives much more easily than we can see our own issues and that that makes us more judgmental, more likely to condemn people, more insensitive to their needs, their journey, the excuses they make for themselves. And that's not a strong place to come from. It's not a position from which we can actually be of any real help to anyone with a legitimate need. And so Jesus says:

Hypocrite! First get rid of the log from your own eye, then perhaps you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye. (7:5)

This passage tells us a lot about human nature, and gives us some insight into a phrase like "blind spots". A physical blind spot is the place in your field of vision that corresponds to the lack of light-detecting photoreceptor cells on the optic disc of the retina, where the optic nerve passes through the optic disc. Because your brain inserts what it thinks your eye should be seeing, and because the other eye adds its perspective, you generally don't notice your physical blind spot. But our brain is up to other self-protecting tricks when it comes to our emotional or psychological blind spots. We simply don't see ourselves as other people see us. We are the hero of our own story and we make all kinds of excuses and allowances for our hero so that we can cope with life.

But sometimes this can get silly and we will refuse to acknowledge that we've made mistakes or that our attitude is ungodly. We've become skilled at justifying ourselves and we just keep doing it - at the cost of being able to grow up and at the cost of being able to honestly help others. So, Jesus' counsel is that we deal with our own stuff, humbly get help for the problems and shortcomings in our own life, so that we can have a greater vision and capacity to help others.

Then this zinger to close off the passage (in the NIV):

Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.

We can try to look deeply into this passage to figure out who are “dogs” and who are “pigs”, but that would miss the point. Dogs have no appreciation of what is sacred and pigs have no appreciation of the value of pearls. So, if you were to throw pearls at pigs and they were to try to eat them, they might just stomp them into the mud and turn around and attack you for providing them with stones instead of food.

Jesus is saying that we need to figure out who will be receptive to the good news of God’s Kingdom. Maybe we do that with a couple of questions, with a probing comment that will draw out the person’s values or convictions about things like truth and goodness. However we go about it, Jesus says that we should not waste our breath on people who have no interest in what we have to say. In fact, He says that our persistent efforts to convince people who are resistant to God could provoke them to turn against us and try to harm us.

Is this judging people? If you mean, does this involve making a judgment about which people are receptive and which ones are not, yes, it does. But is this the kind of harsh, condemning judgment that springs from our insecurities and pride and weakness and that Jesus tells us to stop doing? No, discerning who is receptive to the true riches of God’s Kingdom is not the same thing as condemning someone for their failure or weakness in some area of their lives.

In the overall perspective on this passage, Jesus tells us that we’re not equipped to be the judges of the human race, that we have flaws, blind spots, that need to be corrected before we can judge fairly. He does say that we need to be discerning, to focus our efforts on people with open minds and hearts, but that’s not the same as being condemning or harsh. We need to see the difference and apply that difference in the way we deal with people. Let’s go back through the passage and see how we are to do that.

1. Remember the golden rule - “treat others the way you want to be treated”? Jesus applies this same principle to the way we judge others: “Stop judging others because they will treat you as you treat them.” Do we like to hear people judging us for some petty thing, or for some character flaw in ourselves that we weren’t even aware of? Then don’t turn around and treat someone else that way. Don’t think for a minute that the world needs your judgments, your negative opinions, or your harsh critiques as much as it needs your kind questions, your gentle insights or your peaceful wisdom. That’s how we want to be treated by others and so that’s how we should approach any issues that require something like correction or rebuke.
2. The second principle that is clearly stated in this passage is that we need to be very aware of our own issues. Jesus says “How can you think of saying, ‘Friend, let me help you get rid of your problem’, when your own problems are like a log in your

eye?" The unstated reason is that we aren't nearly as aware of our own problems as we are of other people's problems ... and that gives us a feeling of entitlement. We think we have a right to speak into people's lives about whatever issue is presenting, because we've basically got our act together. Why else would we find it so easy to judge people? If we can remember that our negative opinions of others are always telling us something about ourselves, then we need to be asking ourselves, "What is it? Why do I feel superior to, or incensed by or having some need to condemn this person?" And then find what it is, give it over to God and ask Him to help you change. This isn't a lesson on how to get more spiritual or go deeper with God as much as it is a lesson in obedience. Jesus said, "Stop judging others, and you will not be judged," so we need to take Him seriously.

3. The third principle comes from the final verse and it's our need to be discerning at the same time we practice love and grace in all our relationships. If we sense that someone is not dealing with their personal issues and for whatever reason poses some level of danger to the wider body of Christ, we continue to love them, speak graciously to them, show support to them, but we may not be able to entrust ourselves to them. We may need to be cautious in what we share with them. We may need to draw even closer to walk through some of the things that are troubling in their lives.

Outside the church, we need to exercise a similar sensitivity to people who don't yet share our faith. There are many people who are hungry for spiritual reality, for something they can believe in, a God they can trust - and we should be eager to share with them. Others are not ready to give up the lordship of their lives, not ready to hear that they are sinners in need of a Saviour, not open to the good news of God's Kingdom come - and, once we sense that, we need to back off, pray, continue to be gracious and kind, and wait for God to act.

The overall thrust of the passage is, I think, that we are not to put ourselves at the centre of all our human relationships - it's not all about you or me, our fears, our opinions, our outrage - but we need to put God at the heart of our relationships and invite Him to teach us how to pursue both justice and mercy, how to practice both discernment and compassion and how to see the potential in every relationship for the goodness of God to have influence.

This is huge, so much so that I would call it overwhelming. To take myself out of the centre and put God there is massive and requires me to find my complete security in what He says about me and what He wants to do in and through my life. But if I can do that - if I can approach all my relationships from the point of view of what God wants from them, then I won't need to be judging people, projecting my insecurities onto them, making myself look better or more important than they are. Instead, I can be free to accept people and the journey they are on, to love them and serve them in Jesus' name, and to share my life with my fellow pilgrims.