

**SERMON TITLE:** “Who Are You to Judge?”

**TEXT:** Matthew 7:1-5

**PREACHED AT:** Neighbourhood Church

**BY:** Ryan Dueck

**DATE:** March 22, 2009/Fourth Sunday of Lent

---

For the past month or so we’ve been looking at the Sermon on the Mount as a window into the question of what following Jesus means in everyday life, in our ordinary relationships and activities. The question that’s been behind this series of sermons is: *how does what we believe about Jesus and the gospel affect life “on the ground?”*

And so we’ve looked at things like turning the other cheek, the problem of worry, what it means to be salt and light, etc.

This morning we’re going to move on to Matthew 7 and look at another very well known (and often misunderstood) passage:

Matthew 7:1-5

*1 "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. 2 For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*

*3 "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in someone else's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? 4 How can you say, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from the other person's eye.*

---

**Do not judge.** Sounds simple enough, doesn’t it? Well maybe not... As always, it’s a good place to start is with a clarification of terms. When Jesus says, “Do not judge” what kind of judging is he talking about?

The word “judge” has a fairly wide semantic range.

- the verb *krino* can mean at least three things
  - judicial/legal term
  - to discern/evaluate
  - to condemn

Let’s have a look at some of these.

“*Who are you to judge me?*” This is a phrase that many of us are probably well acquainted with. We live at a time and in a place where tolerance is considered to be one of the highest virtues. As Canadians, we pride ourselves on our openness and inclusivity, our willingness to make room for those who aren’t like us. We’re really, really, *really* nice people who don’t want to offend or judge anybody.

An example: When we were living in Vancouver we would pass by an older gentleman's house every day on the way to the kids' school. He had a nice dog and the kids loved playing with him (which would sometimes hinder our efforts to make it to school on time!). One day we got to talking and he found out I was studying theology. Well, this piece of information was the launching pad for him to explain to me all kinds of interesting things!

He was raised a Roman Catholic, he said, but was currently into Zen Buddhism, among other things. It was a classic "smorgasbord approach" to religion—a little of this, a little of that, whatever I happen to be hungry for.

He went on to tell me about how in his view "heaven" was the legacy of goodness, kindness, and tolerance we passed on to our children. And "hell?" Well, that was what happened when we passed on hatred, cruelty, and intolerance. I asked him a few questions about what I thought were some significant inconsistencies in his view, but he wasn't very interested in discussing those. So, we talked about something else.

But the main lesson to be learned from this was that we needed to just stop *judging* each other.

This pretty much sums up the dominant attitude out there right now. In our increasingly **globalized** world where we can find out pretty much anything we want and communicate instantly through the click of a mouse, we are increasingly aware of other beliefs and cultures and how they differ from our own.

We're aware that reality is at least partially "socially constructed" (to throw out a big theoretical term), that there is no big "truth" or absolute standard of right and wrong. You have your ideas about what is right and acceptable, I have mine, and they're all just the result of where and when we happen to have been brought up.

In our increasingly **individualized** world, we come to think that we are the ultimate standard of what is good and true and acceptable.

You have your tastes and preferences, and I have mine. About the only universal truth that we seem to be prepared to accept is that there *is* no universal truth and that we should not "judge" one another.

"Judging" others is seen, in some ways, to be the ultimate sin in our postmodern context.

From the perspective of our culture, then, Jesus' words in Matthew 7:1—"Do not judge, or you too will be judged"—seem pretty good. They are interpreted as a kind of manifesto of the twenty-first century postmodern individual, a classic statement of tolerance and liberty and probably any number of other virtues that we have "discovered" in our retreat from our religious past.

So, when Jesus tells us in Matthew 7:1 not to judge or we will be judged, is this what he has in mind?

---

The short answer is “no.”

This passage *cannot* mean that we are not to be discerning or critical, or that judgment is somehow wrong in and of itself.

Jesus himself warned his followers to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves (Mat 10:16). Also, the distinctions drawn in the Sermon on the Mount require that decisive judgments be made! Jesus himself warns of false prophets (Mat 7:15—sheep in wolves clothing) and demands that people make right judgments (John 7:24), and there are numerous references to judging correctly throughout the New Testament (1 Cor. 5:5, Gal. 1:8-9, Phil. 3:2, 1 John 4:1).

It cannot mean that we are to forego all judicial involvement. God is a God of order and justice. God used a pretty strict legal code with the nation of Israel. In the NT, Paul tells the church to “be subject to the governing authorities (Romans 12). Jesus is certainly not advocating lawlessness here!

Our God is also a God of judgment. The Bible speaks frequently of God’s ability and obligation to judge evil. Part of what we believe is involved in the new creation God will one day usher in is that God will judge the earth. In Revelation 19:11, we read this in the middle of an apocalyptic scene where Christ himself confronts the Beast and the kings of the earth:

*I I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war.*

The God of the Bible is not a sappy, tolerant, anything-goes patron of Western liberal democracy. His mercy and his patience have limits.

Jesus, himself, judged people’s actions and behaviour in the gospels. When he cleansed the temple of the money-changers he was exercising judgment—he was telling the truth about what was going on, declaring it to be inappropriate, wrong, contrary to God’s intentions.

Paul spends a lot of time in his letters to the various early churches talking about church discipline that is impossible without moral discernment and a willingness to judge certain behaviours and beliefs as false or immoral.

And finally, when we look at what has preceded this passage in the Sermon on the Mount it becomes abundantly clear that Jesus *cannot* and *does* not mean that his followers are not to distinguish between right and wrong.

Forgiving others when they sin against us presumes that we are able and obligated to discern between right and wrong. The entire “you have heard it said... but I say to you” section that James preached on several weeks ago demands moral judgment. Hungering and thirsting for righteousness presumes that we are creatures who can tell the difference between righteousness and evil. Being the light of the world presumes that we know what darkness is.

So, despite what certain dominant elements of our culture might like to believe is the case—what they might pretend Jesus is saying in this morning’s text—Jesus is *not* advocating a moral free-for-all where no behaviour is judged, and we all just live together in blissful, peaceful tolerance and acceptance. An awful lot of the Bible has to be ignored to get *that* message out of Jesus.

---

So if Jesus is *not* telling us to abandon legal justice, and he is *not* telling us to avoid moral discernment, and he’s *not* saying that we don’t have to hold one another accountable, what is he saying?

Well, it seems to have something to do with being *judgmental*. Jesus knows that we are moral beings who have to make judgments, but he also knows how tempting it is for us to make judgments of others *without first looking at ourselves*.

Jesus knows that quite often it is the very people who are the *most* eager to tell others what to do (or what *not* to do) that are *least* likely to take a long look in the mirror before they do so.

In verses 3-5, Jesus uses the famous metaphor of trying to remove a speck out of our neighbour’s eye while we have a log in our own.

One of the classic biblical examples of this comes from the OT book of 2 Samuel 12:1-15 (David, Bathsheba, Uriah, etc). Nathan, the court prophet, tells David a story about two men in a city—one rich, one poor—and the rich man taking advantage of the poor. In telling the story, Nathan exposes David’s behaviour taking Bathsheba from Uriah.

This is a story that makes the hypocrisy of judgment and condemnation without self-examination pretty obvious. But are there other, less obvious examples, in our own lives? I think that there are.

Just this week I was commiserating with my brother about someone at his college who was giving him a good deal of headaches about his theological views on some matter or another. I was expressing my (quite righteous) anger at the obvious stupidity and intellectual inadequacy of his opponent. As I was talking with my brother, I happened to glance over at the open Bible beside my computer, and saw this morning’s text staring back at me:

*Do not judge or you will be judged.*

Here I was, getting ready to preach on being judgmental, pronouncing judgment upon someone I had never even met, much less gotten to know at anything resembling a deep level. Did I know *anything* about his story? His hopes? His fears? His insecurities? His ambitions? His limitations? His strengths? Did I know anything about how God might have used him for good in the lives of others?

Nope. But I was quite willing—eager, even!—to judge him because *he didn't think like me*. I was rummaging around for the speck in the eye of a total stranger while all the while having a log in my own.

I think my little misadventure this gives us a good picture of what I think Jesus is talking about in this passage. What had I done to this stranger? I had done three things that together comprise what I think Jesus is telling us to avoid in this passage—all, conveniently, beginning with the letter “L.”

First, I had **labeled** him.

- I had put placed him into a negative category in my mind
- We do this all the time, don't we? Someone does something that annoys us and we slap a name them: “oh you know so-and-so, he's just high-strung... or a control-freak... or insecure... or one of those “fundamentalists”... or a “liberal”...
- We reduce a human being, made in God's image—a human being with all kinds of complex desires, longings, weaknesses, hopes, and fears—to the tiny confines of a less than complimentary category
- This is exactly what I did to the person causing problems for my brother.

Second, I had **limited** him.

- There's an obvious connection between labeling and limiting: labels are short and easy to remember, but they leave no room for nuance or qualification
- They don't tell enough of the story—they tell just enough of the story to justify our judgment of the person, just enough to make our *opponent* look bad and *ourselves* to look righteous and exemplary
- Again, this is exactly what I did. It had the advantage of making me feel smart and virtuous; it had the disadvantage of limiting a human being whom God loves, and for whom Christ died to a tiny little box out of which there was no escape

Finally, I had **liquidated** him.

- In a sense, when we label and limit people, it's a short step to writing them off: “so-and-so isn't worth talking to because they obviously don't or can't understand”; “they'll never change, so why even bother with them”; “there's just no reasoning with them!”; “they're blinded by sin”; “they're hopelessly unspiritual”  
“don't even waste your time with them, they're not worth it.”
- We don't *technically* liquidate people, of course. We don't *kill* them (although David seemed to blast through the “label” and “limit” stages and was pretty anxious to liquidate!).

- But when we judge others—oblivious to our own faults, shortcomings, and sinful behaviour, we put them in a category that is separate from the one we see ourselves in
- “*We* make mistakes, sure, but we’re getting better. God’s still working on *us*... *We* just need a little tweaking and adjusting...”
- But those we judge? They’re almost *beyond hope*. Irredeemable.

---

Irredeemable?

If we know even the slightest bit about the story of the Bible, this ought to be a word that we are *extremely* hesitant to use. If we think back to our series on the book of Genesis, we remember that no matter how wicked and disobedient his people become, God never gives up on them. Throughout the OT and into the NT we see a God who works with people, with all their faults. Indeed, it is through ordinary sinful people that God moves the story forward.

If there is one thing that we learn from God’s story, it is that God can and does redeem even the most hopeless and helpless of sinners.

Even the judgmental.

Matthew 7:1-5 is not a call to suspend critical judgment or pretend we are blind to the actions of others; rather, it is a plea to be generous and to understand our place.

When Jesus tells us not to judge, he is *not* saying, “Don’t worry about your behaviour or that of others because it’s not that important.” He is *not* saying, “Just make sure that you are tolerant and don’t infringe on others’ individual choices.”

What he *is* saying is, “be generous and merciful, even as I am generous and merciful with you.” “Don’t shy away from self-evaluation.” “Take a good, hard, long look in the mirror before you presume to correct your brother or sister.” “Don’t be a hypocrite” “Know your limitations and speak and act within them.” “There is no one who is irredeemable or hopeless for me.”

“I am God, and you are not.”

*Do not judge or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*

“I am God, and you are not.”

In James 4 we read these words:

---

James 4:12

***There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?***

---

There is *only one* Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. Only one. Not me, not you, not anyone but God himself.

We must speak the truth. We are obligated to correct our neighbour as an act of love. We are to be morally discerning and wise as followers of Jesus in a fallen world. But we are to do all of these things with transparency and openness, with a willingness to let others correct us as well.

And we are to be the *most* discerning and critical and reflective and honest about ourselves. It is *our* intentions, *our* weaknesses, *our* attitudes and actions, and *our* omissions that ought to come under the heaviest scrutiny.

Our goal must always be to give evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in our own lives:

Galatians 5:22-23

*22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*

A few weeks ago Dave led a song which used the words from Micah 6:8:

*We are to **do** justly.*

- right and wrong matter, justice is hugely important to God, and our actions must reflect this

*But we are to **love** mercy.*

- not *do* mercy, but *love* mercy

*And we are to **walk** humbly.*

- God is God; we are not; only God can condemn

If we keep these commandments before us, even when we do the hard work of moral discernment, even when we approach our brothers and sisters to correct and be corrected by them, and even when we challenge our culture's confused ideas about tolerance and relativism...

... we will *never* label, or limit, or liquidate.

This approach—this refusal to judge—simply reflects the basic gospel truth that Jesus did not come for the healthy but for the sick—in other words, for all of us. Some of us might be sick in different ways or to different degrees than others, but we all need mercy. All of our fates depend upon God not labeling (“sinner”), limiting (“hopeless,” “lost”) and liquidating (“condemned”) us.

Even when someone seems beyond our capacity to love or accept or put up with, they are never beyond God's. And in the end, his judgment is the only one that matters.

Thanks be to God.