

Judging – Matthew 7:1-5

Did you catch the command Jesus gave to his followers in that first verse? “Do not Judge” or the more direct KJV translation, “Judge not.” That sounds pretty simple and straightforward...

So why do so many people have so much trouble with this verse? The word translated “judge” speaks of criticizing or discriminating. Both words invite important conversations for us in light of all that is happening in our world today.

Criticizing seems to be a national past time for many people. Stand in line – six feet apart of course – at the local grocery or department store and listen to the conversations.

-“The line is too slow”

- “Why do we have to wear masks and use sanitizer?”

- “There should be more cashiers”

I challenge you to get through a day without hearing the annoying sound of the critic.

The Finnish composer Sibelius (who wrote the tune “Finlandia” (“ie. Be Still My Soul”)) was walking through the open fields one fine Spring morning with a friend. The birds were singing their songs in beautiful harmony, each species adding to the sonnet in perfect harmony. The musical mind of Sibelius was enjoying the symphony God provided through nature when suddenly a crow flew overhead. “Caw. Caw. Caw.”

Sibelius winched at the harsh sound and said sadly, “There goes the critic.”

Unfortunately, there are more critics among people than you will ever find in nature. Some people are so critical, others just try and avoid them.

Two boys lived next door to a churchman who seemed to have missed childhood somehow. He was constantly harping at the boys for something. One day the local pastor was walking by their house and noticed they were playing ball between the houses on a small stretch of grass. It seemed odd they would play there when there was a large field behind their house.

“Why don’t you go play out in the field?” the pastor asked the boys.

“We don’t want Mr. Smith to see us playing ball on Sunday,” they replied.

The pastor smiled and said, “Don’t you think God can see you?”

“Oh yes,” they replied, “but we would rather God see us than Mr. Smith!”

Jesus says we must not live our lives as the self-appointed critics of everyone else.

And he also says we cannot discriminate against others. No doubt this command springs from the tendency of the Jewish people to look down on anyone outside of the Jewish nation. The religious leaders were particularly hard on anyone who did not have Jewish blood. A good Jew

would not eat with a Gentile, talk to them and if possible, not do business with them. It was beneath them to show kindness to the foreigner, even though the very Law of God said they should show compassion.

Prejudice and discrimination is a topic that has captured the headlines all this week after the tragic death of George Floyd. Riots and protests have swept through much of the USA and into Canada as the ugly reality of racism and discrimination once again raises its ugly head. This is not an American issue, nor simply a white vs black issue. It comes in all colors and in all nations. It seems to be a part of the fallen nature of humanity to view one people group as less important or valuable than another. Prejudice is present in almost every person, though not often acknowledged or even recognized. But even in our peaceful little city prejudice lives and mars the community. Ask some of our Chinese friends how they have fared during COVID...

And each time we point a finger at a certain race and blame them for our problems, and choose to treat them with less respect or civility simply because of their language or colour or ethnicity, we set ourselves up as judges, declaring we think we are better than others.

Can you hear Jesus cry out to the multitudes, "Judge not!" Do not criticize and do not discriminate.

Jesus knows that this is a heart issue. It is about learning to love others as God has loved us. Our criticism and discrimination proves we have a long way to go to become the loving people God's children ought to be.

But Pastor, doesn't God's Word say we should test the Spirits to see if they are from God or not? Should we not discern if a teaching is scripturally based or not, and if the speaker is true to God's Word? Should not the wrong be exposed and the truth be declared?

Yes to all of these things, but this is not what Jesus is addressing here. Jesus is stopping the attack made on others in the name of religion or spiritual superiority. It is the proud stance that says "I am better than someone else." It is seeing some people as less valuable or important and attacking what they do and say not because it is wrong but because it is different.

Jesus goes on to say, be careful about judging others, for if you do, you also will be judged.

The word used in this text for "judged" has the idea of a one time judgement. One cannot help but think about the final judgement when we will stand before Jesus and have to give an account of our lives, and every idle word we have spoken (according to Matthew 12:36). We would do well not to be critical of those around us, and certainly not speak words that indicate we think some people are less important than others.

But as it has often been noted, the things we criticize the most are usually the things we see in ourselves as well – and do not like what we see. In other words, we will attack the vices in others that we despise in our own lives. So when we judge, we may be judging ourselves! We

may be exposing where our weaknesses lie, those areas God still needs to redeem. We will be judged, Jesus says, and sometimes we judge ourselves!

A man was heard criticising his neighbour for being so lazy. “He just sat on that rock all day long!” he complained.

“How do you know this is true?” someone asked the critic. “Simple,” was the reply, “I was sitting here all day watching him!”

Jesus says, “In the same way you judge others you will be judged. With the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”

How do you want your people to treat you? Jesus says that how you treat others is how you will be treated. If you are harsh and unkind, critical and demanding, well, others will return the favour. Some people wonder why they have no friends, but if you hang out with them very long you will find they are always tearing someone apart with their words. They can find fault in the nicest of people. Remember, there were those who found fault in Jesus, and he was the only perfect person to ever walk this earth! So the rest of us are easy targets for the critic.

But if you do not want to be judged, then do not be the judge of others. Recently my uncle passed away, and one of the comments made at his funeral, more than once, was that George never criticized others. Many times he had reason to find fault in others – as we all do – but he chose to find something positive and encouraging to say rather than criticise. It was easy to find good to say about George because he was always finding the good in others.

Jesus goes on to paint a most ridiculous picture. He asks how we intend to take a fine particle of dust out of one person’s eye when we have a plank in our own eye. Of course this is exaggeration, but the point is clear: before we can judge anyone else we have to examine our own lives. As Jesus would say to the crowd gathered around a woman caught in adultery, “He who is without sin cast the first stone.”¹ That day they all walked away: they knew they were all sinners.

There is no perfect person among us. We all have our own faults and sins that must be dealt with. It is true that we are forgiven by God as we come in repentance before him, trusting in Jesus for salvation, but we are not perfected in any way. We are all a work in progress, and as the kids songs rightly says, “He’s still working on me; to make me what I ought to be.”

Our faults can be far greater than the faults of those we criticise. In fact, it is usually pride that leads to a critical spirit, which is one of the root sins in a person’s life. As Proverbs 18:16 says, “Pride goes before destruction..” It is pride that makes us think we are better than someone else, and that is always a recipe for disaster. Jesus is warning us against this in these verses.

¹ John 8:1-11

How sad it is when we critically try to fix everyone around us, but fail to look honestly into the mirror to see what we really look like. If we looked in the mirror we would see we are impatient, or rude, or selfish, or lazy, or angry, or careless. We do not see this because we are too busy find faults in others. Imagine what kind of home a couple will have if one of the partners spends all their time finding fault in the other person? Not a happy thought! How much of the good and lovely gift that is in a Christian home will be missed by the critical? Will they ever experience joy and happiness with their partner? I doubt it.

There will be critics, but just do not let them be the Christians. Let Christians be the encouragers. Most people are doing the best they can with what they have, and instead of criticising, we should encourage.

The great evangelist and preacher Dwight L. Moody preached a powerful sermon at a rally, and hundreds turned their lives over to Christ. Nonetheless, after the service a man came to him and said, "Mr. Moody, in your sermon I noticed that you made 11 mistakes in grammar."

Mr. Moody replied, "Very likely I did. My early education was faulty. I often wish I received more schooling. But I am using all the grammar I know in the service of Christ; what are you doing with yours?"

Verses 6 is a most puzzling verse in this context. It speaks about not giving dogs what is sacred, or throwing pearls to the swine. It will be a waste and may come back to harm you.

What is this all about?

It might be argued that Jesus does not want us to use any discernment – no judgement at all. Yet there are times when we must use discernment, when we must decide what is right or wrong, and in particular, point out the dangers in some people's teachings or actions.

Jesus refers to dogs and pigs. Both were terms used by Jews to describe those outside the faith. They especially liked to apply these terms to the Romans who ruled over them. If a follower of Jesus saw the Gentile harming another, taking advantage of someone, bullying or cheating someone, say something. The sacred gift of tolerance and acceptance is wasted on someone who has no respect for another human being, or any respect of God. To give the pearl of grace and trust to someone who does not respect justice or fair play is like giving a pearl necklace to a pig.

Within the household of faith there is much trust and grace. Christians will not spend their time tearing each other apart with criticism. But there will be a time to speak out against those who are outside the faith, who are causing harm on others. Christians must speak out when they see injustice. When justice looks different depending on the color of your skin, then Christians must criticize and speak out. It is no longer time to be silent.

For if Christians will not speak out for the oppressed and downtrodden then they will soon be the ones under foot. As someone said, "Christians must be the moral conscience of a nation."

We stand on God's standards of justice and mercy and love for all people, and when that is violated, we must not be silent.

Jesus commands us to stop being critical of each other – stop judging one another. This is particularly true in the household of faith. No doubt there is much to criticize if we want to focus on that, for the church is made up of people who are prone to mistakes and faults.

It should not be our task in life to see how many faults we can find in our brothers and sisters but instead we should look to find as many ways to encourage and bless as possible. A carrot motivates a mule to move much better than a whip. We all respond better to encouragement rather than to criticism.

We cannot know what others are going through, what their circumstances are, so how can we be their judge?

The year my father died of cancer, I was working after school at a grocery store. My dad died on a Sunday and on Monday I went to work after school. You can imagine how productive I was. I forgot to do routine tasks, didn't hear the calls for help at the tills, and basically walked around in a fog. Cashiers were short with me and the other stock boys criticized my work. I couldn't blame them...

But my manager was a Christian named Jake. He had a lot of ammunition to criticize and judge my performance. But instead he simply asked, "What's wrong, Gary?" When I told him, he shared his condolences and support, and never once criticized my performance. He found out why I was acting like I was and chose to extend grace.

How many times are we quick to judge without having a clue what the other person is going through? We can be so quick to judge, and then we find out what is happening in their lives and we feel awful. Jesus says, "I can teach you how to prevent that from happening again. Judge not."

How are you doing with keeping this simple command of Jesus? If you are honest, can you say you encourage more, or criticize? If you tend to be critical, have you asked yourself "Why?"

But more importantly, if we do see we have been drawn into a spirit of judgment, then we need to humbly come to God and ask Him to forgive us. We need to ask Him to fill us with His Holy Spirit who will bring God's love and grace into our lives. As the Holy Spirit works in us the fruit will be love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.

This morning, do you hear the Lord? "Judge not," he says. Why does he give this command? Because he loves us and knows if we judge, we will be judged. And when we are judged by others – and we will be – pray God will give you the grace to forgive and love anyway...