

## Judging vs. Helping

### Matthew 7:1-5

There is a sad, interesting perception about Christians among people who describe themselves as “outsiders” – people who don’t consider themselves Christians. The perception is that “Christians no longer represent what Jesus had in mind, that Christianity in our society is not what it was meant to be” (*unchristian*, p. 15). Of course their perception may be wrong, but it needs to be taken seriously. One of the primary areas in which outsiders think the church is un-Christian is that they consider Christians to be judgmental. The Barna Group surveyed people outside the church between the ages of 16 and 29; they found that 87% of them said that the term *judgmental* describes present-day Christianity.

Just as significantly, half of the Christians they surveyed in the same age range also believed that the term *judgmental* describes present-day Christianity (p. 184). This is different from the perception that Christians have strong convictions and beliefs. The perception – both inside and outside the church – is that Christians are more focused on condemning people than helping them become more like Jesus.

I find it significant that Jesus Himself anticipated this possibility. Today we are going to consider Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 7: “Do not judge so that you will not be judged.” Jesus anticipated that His followers might have the tendency to become judgmental. Jesus will give a strong challenge to avoid being judgmental and to become the type of people who can actually help others become more like Him.

***The Command: Do not judge so that you will not be judged. (Matthew 7:1-2).***

1 “Do not judge so that you will not be judged.

The terms translated “judge” has a fairly broad semantic range. The term can mean “to discern, to judge judicially, to be judgmental, or to condemn” (Carson, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 99). The context determines which nuance the author has in mind. Jesus certainly is **not** telling His disciples “Do not discern between right and wrong, good and evil, truth and error.” He is **not** saying that we should never evaluate others’ lives. Later in chapter 7 Jesus will specifically tell His disciples that they would be able to identify false prophets: “. . . you will know them by their fruits” (7:16, 20). Discernment is tremendously valuable among Jesus’ followers. (See also John 7:24 for this usage in another context.)

“Do not judge. . .” has the sense here of “Do not be judgmental or condemning.” How do you know if you’re being judgmental or condemning? Think of a time when you’ve spotted a flaw or weakness or sin in another person (a friend, a family member, a pastor, a coworker). If you were judgmental, you weren’t concerned about helping that person overcome some weakness or sin; your heart wasn’t broken because that person wasn’t experiencing God and His fullness. If you were judgmental, you were merely angry and offended. You weren’t at all interested in the other person’s well-being or spiritual growth. And it probably showed in the way you responded. You might have spoken harshly to the person about his/her behavior without any thought about how your words might compound the problem. If you were judgmental, you probably also gossiped about the person, spreading your opinion about this person around to other people. As we all know, gossip only makes the matter worse – even if it’s true.

Judgmentalism and condemnation can be motivated by fear or insecurity or pride (or a lot of other things), but it's never motivated by love. Judgmentalism is justified in a number of different ways. Quite often the attitude is, "What I am saying is true. I'm just being honest." The problem with that attitude is that it's very possible to be honest and to be selfish; it's possible to be insightful and to be mean/unkind. That is not the mind of Christ.

Can you think of a time recently when you're "told somebody off" or "given them a piece of your mind" or "jumped down somebody's throat"? Some people do these sorts of things and then brag about it; they quote themselves telling somebody else off as if it's a great virtue. That is not the mind of Christ. We need to understand that in the kingdom of God it is never enough to be right. Jesus was always right and yet He wasn't judgmental. He actually said that God didn't send Him into the world to judge the world, but so that the world would be saved through Him (John 3:17). Yes, people will be judged, but that's not why He came. As disciples of His, we shouldn't live to judge people either.

As we'll see later in this passage, Jesus advocates a very different approach toward those who've sinned, blown it, and generally messed up. The attitude is one of humility and love instead of pride and anger.

A theme that runs throughout the NT is that the judgmental person is assuming a role that only God should have – the role of Judge. For example, in 1 Corinthians 4 Paul told the Corinthians not to judge his motives. In verse 5 we read:

5 Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God.

The Lord Jesus is the One who would disclose the motives of Paul's heart, not the Corinthians. James 4:12 makes the same point:

12 There is *only* one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?

Being judgmental/condemning toward others is the epitome of pride because God alone is the Judge.

Jesus says, "Do not judge *so that you will not be judged.*" In verse 2 He fills out that idea that judgmentalism invites judgment.

2 "For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you.

This dynamic is observable in human relationships. If you are demanding of other people, they will probably be demanding of you. If you are understanding and lenient with others, they will probably treat you the same. But I think Jesus has in mind primarily our relationship with God.

We've already seen this principle articulated in the Lord's Prayer. Jesus told His disciples to pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Jesus later made the comment that "If you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions" (5:15). It's unthinkable that a person would plead with God for forgiveness and then be unwilling to turn around and forgive someone who's wronged him/her. That's just too hypocritical. Here in Matthew 7, it's equally unthinkable that a person would cry out to God for mercy and then refuse to show mercy to others through being judgmental and condemning. That too is too hypocritical for the kingdom of God. Those who aren't gracious and generous to others will miss out on grace and generosity from God.

I don't think that's the case in an absolute sense. Jesus died even for the sin of judgmentalism. And I don't think God will treat us *exactly* the way we treat others; He is always more gracious and merciful than we are (He proved that by the cross). But Jesus' teaching clearly implies that God withholds some of His generosity from us when we aren't generous to others.

Jesus drives home the point with *An Illustration: the speck and the log (Matthew 7:3-5)* In verses 3 through 5 Jesus gives His classic illustration:

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?"

Jesus is highlighting our tendency to become fixated on someone else's fault, unaware that worse things are stirring in our own hearts. It's like a person with a beam in his own eye trying to remove a splinter in someone else's.

It is true that everybody is sinful and therefore that everybody has *something* in his/her eye. None of us see perfectly clearly. But Jesus seems to be saying here that those who are judgmental have something larger in their eyes than the people they are judging. It's like a beam compared to a speck of sawdust. What might judgmental/condemning people have in their eyes?

If you read back through the Sermon on the Mount, you will find lots of lumber. The log in his/her eye may be anger. Many times our judgmentalism is fueled by anger. The judgmental person may not understand that "everybody who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court. . ." (Matthew 5:22).

Maybe the log in his/her eye is revenge. Most of the time we feel fully justified in judging other people because of what they've done to us. But Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also" (Matthew 5:38-39). Many times the judgmental person is "right" in that the other person has sinned; but the judgmental person is wrong when s/he retaliates (verbally, relationally, etc.).

The log in his/her eye may be a lack of compassion/love. Jesus told His disciples, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). Paul pointed out in 1 Corinthians 13:5 that anger is evidence of a lack of love because "love is not provoked." If I'm angry at you, I shouldn't think, "You made me angry." I should think, "I don't love as much as I

should.” The judgmental person doesn’t think in these ways, and his/her lack of love and generosity and grace is as huge as a log.

We really need to keep reading in order to arrive at the proper conclusion. I have known people who have given up on this passage too soon and basically concluded, “Until I’m perfect I don’t have any right to talk to anybody else about his/her sin.” Their lack of perfection is an excuse for not getting involved in others’ lives. But that is not the mind of Christ. The mind of Christ is expressed in verse 5:

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.

Jesus calls the judgmental person a hypocrite because s/he appears to be one thing (namely spiritually superior to others) while in fact s/he is something entirely different. And so Jesus says, “first take the log out of your own eye.” Examine your own life in the presence of God. Let your own sin break your heart and humble you before God. In light of the death and resurrection of Jesus, confess that sin to God and receive a fresh cleansing. “And then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” **Then** your own eye will be clear enough to take the speck out of your brother’s eye. If your brother has something in his eye, the compassionate thing to do is to become the type of person who can remove it.

Jesus wants to move us from being judgmental to being helpful. There’s nothing particularly Christlike about “minding your own business” if it means leaving your brother with a speck in his eye. Quite often I get sawdust in my eyes, and it’s no fun; nobody likes having something in their eyes. As we deal with our own sins, we should progressively become the type of people who can help others deal with their sins.

In Galatians 6:1 Paul advocated the same approach to helping others.

1 Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.

Paul tells “you who are spiritual” to deal with those who have been caught in some trespass. Only those who keep in step with the Spirit will have the humility and gentleness necessary. Notice that the goal isn’t putting the other person in his place or getting something off your chest. The goal is restoration (“restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness”). Notice that Paul, like Jesus, teaches that self-examination comes first (“each one looking to yourself”).

Philo of Alexandria was the one who said, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.” Those who are spiritual understand that because they are aware of their own great battle. Those who are spiritual don’t shoot their wounded. They come to them with words of healing and with hope.

Chrysostom said to “Correct [the person who sins] not as a foe, nor as an adversary exacting a penalty, but as a physician providing medicines” (cited in Stott, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 180).

The last person you would want messing around in your eye is someone with something in his eye. No, the only person you want removing a splinter in your eye is someone whose own eye was clear. In verse 12 Jesus will give the guiding principle for His teaching on relationships in Matthew 7; it is known as “the golden rule.”

12 In everything, therefore, treat people in the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

***The Vision: Being people who are helpful, not judgmental.***

Jesus is putting forth a vision for his disciples in which they completely eliminate condemnation and judgmentalism. It simply isn't necessary in the kingdom. You don't need even a little bit of judgmentalism to keep people honest. Instead, as Jesus' disciples we should be the type of people who so thoroughly understand what it takes to deal with sin (because we are dealing with our own sin) that we are legitimately helpful to others. This mode of relating to others should be taken into every sphere of life – into friendships, into families, into the workplace, and into the life of the church.

Think, for example, how parenting would be different if parents practiced Jesus' teaching with their children. C.S. Lewis pointed out 60 years ago in *The Four Loves* that parents often treat their children in ways that they wouldn't dream of treating others. He noticed that parents treat their children with “an incivility which, offered to any other young people, would simply have terminated the acquaintance” (cited in Willard, p. 219). Instead of treating our children the way we would like to be treated, we sometimes berate our children, accuse them of misbehaving before the facts are known, and ridicule the things that are important to them. That type of parenting doesn't win the hearts of our children. Much better is the pattern Jesus teaches here. We **first** take the log out of our own eyes (whether fear, lack of faith, or caring more about our reputation than about our children). Then, when we are humbled by **our own** lack of consistency and sobered by how difficult it is for **us** to walk with God, we come alongside our children and help remove the splinters from their eyes. We are motivated by compassion not fear. We become the type of people they would want to be in relationship with – even if they didn't have to be.

Think about what the church would be like if we all practiced Jesus' teaching. Sometimes I get the feeling that in most churches, people don't really expect **everybody** to live out this type of teaching – as if it's acceptable for some people to be judgmental and condemning because “that's just the way they are.” You just tiptoe around some people and wait for a miraculous transformation when Jesus comes back. But that's not what Jesus had in mind. Can you imagine a church in which **everybody** put aside judgmentalism and condemnation? Such a church wouldn't be “soft on sin” or tolerant of all sorts of unbiblical behavior. To the contrary, in that type of church people could actually quit covering up their sin and hiding from each other because they would be in a room full of helpful people every time they gathered. That's the type of church I want to be part of. That's the type of church I want my family to be part of. That's the type of church to which I'd invite my non-Christian friends. That's the type of church in which “outsiders” could experience the healing presence of Christ.