

Judge Not, Lest You Be Judged
OAK GROVE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Matthew 7:1–5

Let us pray for the awareness and inspiration of God’s Spirit.

God of Courage, be in our speaking. Be also in our listening and speak to our souls’ deep understanding. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

I imagine it is a phrase that many of us, if not most of us, have uttered in our lifetimes. Perhaps we don’t quite remember the circumstances – or the person who was the impetus for us to utter the remark – but it was likely after someone had said something to us about not approving of something we did – or maybe even who we are. Perhaps when someone called us out on a particular statement, or belief, or action, we responded with these words. Of course, I am referring to the familiar phrase, “You’re not the boss of me.”

Actually, the phrase I am referring to might be the most quoted piece of scripture after John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world...” The phrase of scripture would be, “Judge not, lest you be judged.” And while I mentioned that some of the phrases we would be talking about last week and over the next several weeks are thought to be in the Bible, but actually aren’t, the phrase, “Judge not, lest you be judged,” is actually in the bible – but I have included it because it is a phrase that is uttered frequently – but, I think, is often misinterpreted in the ways most people quote this particular passage.

The passage comes from the book of Matthew, and from the section known as the Sermon on the Mount. This is the teaching of Jesus that begins with the Beatitudes – the blessed are the poor, the meek, the pure

in heart, the peacemakers...” and moves on to cover a range of topics including the law and prophets, anger, adultery, divorce, retaliation, love of enemies, prayer, fasting, money, and worry. This is the sermon in which Jesus calls the people to be salt and light to the earth, providing a shining example for all to see of good works that will bring honor and glory to God. It is this context when we then hear the reading for the day. From the 7th chapter of Matthew, verses 1 through 5. Listen for a word from God.

7“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ²For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. ³Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? ⁵You 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.

As I alluded to earlier, this phrase, “Judge not, lest you be judged,” is often quoted when someone has been judged – either in terms of who they are, or some behavior they have engaged in that someone has called them out on. When someone declares another person’s behavior wrong, the phrase is often said as a defense by the person who was called out. Or maybe, if it isn’t directly used as a defense when someone is called out, it can be used in another sense when someone might talk about another, and then declare, “but who am I to judge?” Some might even suggest that this piece of scripture means that it is only God that is to judge, and any true Christian would not judge another person. I believe all of those miss the mark – because this passage really isn’t so much about judgement. Rather, it is about hypocrisy.

Jesus isn't so much talking about judging others, as he is talking about being mindful that when we judge others, we are held to the same standard, so that if we are going to do this, we better make sure our own house is in order. Jesus has just rehearsed a litany of moral issues and topics on how to be in relationship well with other people. He has challenged people to live a life worthy to their calling as children of God – to be shining examples on a hill for others to see. We cannot look at his words about judgement without taking all of what comes before in consideration. And we certainly must pay attention to what comes directly after.

After the warning about judgement, Jesus offers an explanation – that is, we all will be judged by the same measure we use. If we cannot live up to the standard for which we are calling the other person on, then we have no right to apply that standard to another person. Jesus warns us that we must first take the log out of our own eye before we mention the splinter in the other's eye.

This is a matter of perspective and seeing. The closer an object gets to our own eyes, the bigger it will appear. What might look like a small splinter in someone else's eye, will be as big as a log in our own. The fault or poor behavior looms larger in our own life than the same poor behavior or fault in the other's life. Jesus gives us all a warning about making sure we check our own behavior or faults before we name it in someone else. Otherwise, as Jesus says, we are hypocrites.

How many times have we heard or seen someone, and I am afraid to say many times it is someone that professes their Christian faith loudly, that calls out someone, or maybe even an entire group of people, shaming and casting judgement upon someone only to find out later that the very thing the person called out, the fault or poor behavior, was something the accuser were themselves involved in. How many times have we

heard the politician who denounces others for stealing or handling money poorly only to discover they have embezzled funds? Or how many times have we witnessed a politician offer anti-gay legislation or decry being gay as a sin, or vigorously go after an opponent for having an extramarital affair, to discover that they themselves are gay or are having their own affair outside of their marriage? Hypocrisy, it seems, is not in short supply, and has been around for millennia.

One writer notes that we often see the bad in others for those things that might be faults of our own. If we call out selfishness, it might be that we are selfish. If we see arrogance everywhere, it could be that it is because we struggle with arrogance. We see what we know. Jesus is not so much warning against judgement, as he is warning against hypocrisy. Jesus warns us to check our own attitudes and behavior before we attempt to help someone else with theirs. This passage and message from Jesus isn't a prohibition on making judgements, but rather how and about whom you make judgements. He is placing parameters around our judgements.

We all make judgments every day – some more important than others, to be sure, but we make judgements. What to eat, what to wear, who to vote for, who to marry, where to spend our time or our money, how to respond to conflict, who are friends are, what church we attend, or dozens of other decisions we make. It is a good thing to be able to have a discerning will in order to make sound judgements.

But we also make judgments about others – and this is where it gets a little trickier. This is where the difference between judging and judgmental falls, I believe. None of us want to be or to feel that we are being judged in a negative way or by a self-righteous person. Certainly, none of us is interested in hearing from someone who is hypocritical. This is the realm of someone being judgmental. Being judgmental is

when someone is overly critical or negative toward another person. It is to be disparaging toward that other person. It might be that someone is judgmental in order to feel superior to another person, or to belittle the other person. And many times, when someone is judgmental toward another person or group it is when they are not in relationship with that person. And while there is plenty of evidence and example otherwise, I would suggest to you that being judgmental is not at all Christian and not biblical. But making judgments, which we do every day, is both Christian and biblical.

Jesus doesn't condemn making judgements. In fact, later in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus lays out ways we should approach discerning what is right and good between siblings in the faith. In some of his letters, Paul repeatedly emphasizes the community's responsibility to hold its members accountable to one another. However, Paul also reminds us that we are not to judge those outside the community – that is God's job. And perhaps this is one of the most important distinctions to make about judging versus being judgmental – and that is understanding the importance of relationship and of values.

I can make a determination and judgement about my own children's behavior because they are part of my own family, and I am their parent. As parents go about the process of parenting children, one of the most important things we are doing is instilling those values that we think are important. Kelly and I try to impart what we believe is important and essential for our children to be good people. We want them to be authentically themselves. We want them to be kind. We want them to be considerate of others. We want them to be patient with themselves, and with others. We want them to persevere through adversity. We want them to do good in the world. In short, we want them to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. And so we, and they, make

judgements about how they are living up to those values and expectations. And we recognize that as parents that if we expect our children to live up to these values, attributes, and behaviors that we also have to live up to them, and make judgments about how we are doing, and seek forgiveness when we don't live up to them as well.

Judgment allows us to understand what is good. It allows us to seek and ask for forgiveness when we don't live up to that good. And that requires that we are sufficiently introspective and honest about how we ourselves are doing before we approach someone else in judgment.

We do the same thing as a community of faith. We have values that drive and inform us and that are important to this community. These values are grounded in and informed by the life of Jesus as we understand him in scripture. We believe in inclusion and diversity and the unconditional love of God. Because of this belief we seek to be welcoming to all people, to bear witness to this love in word and deed, to be a place where we care for one another, where we act as agents for love, reconciliation, peace, and justice in the world, and where we invite anyone to join us in this venture, even if they don't believe everything we do in exactly the same way, and where we continue to be open and receptive to the calling of God's Spirit. And we make judgements about how we do these things, and we hold one another accountable as a community of faith.

We are able to do this because we are in relationship with one another. Because we have empathy and concern for one another. We can hold one another accountable because there is mutual trust and love between us, built up by praying for one another, serving with one another, worshipping with one another, eating with one another, enjoying one another's company, and caring for one another. Ultimately, we are able to share with one another, to be vulnerable enough to risk holding one

another accountable because we know that we love one another. The goal is to help our sibling in Christ remove the speck or splinter, not to delight in being able to judge another. The goal is not to be able to judge, but rather to help others along the way to remove those barriers that would hinder us all as we try to live lives of integrity, peace, reconciliation, and love. It is about making sure our lives are in order, and then providing assistance and guidance to make sure those that we love and with whom we are in community are also living lives of purpose and intent – that we all are living lives worthy to the calling to which we are called, that exhibit the fruit of the Spirit and give glory to God. This is why we risk speaking the truth in love to one another – because love demands accountability.

There is a saying that goes, the opposite of love is not hate, the opposite of love is indifference. Because we love one another, because we want to exhibit the love of God to one another, and by extension, the world, we cannot be indifferent. And while it is entirely appropriate and necessary to do this within community, to do this among people who are in relationship, it is also necessary at times to make judgements outside of these relationships. It may be necessary, as Christians, to judge a behavior or attitude and take a stand and declare that something is not ok. If we are not in relationship with someone, or if we do this in a public way, it is important that we do this carefully, and with humility, recognizing that we are treading into the potential pitfalls of hypocrisy and self-righteousness.

Judgment means making a determination about something and declaring it good, bad, or indifferent. And every judgement we make implies a particular value judgment underneath. And when there is a clash of values there is typically conflict. I am willing to bet that when someone brings up the scripture, “Judge not, lest you be judged,” when they have been judged by someone else, what underlies that retort and what they

mean is “who are you to question my values? I want you to think I am right and good, and I want my values to be honored.” And so, when we venture into this territory, we must be mindful. But it does not mean that we don’t venture into that territory if we feel that the injustice, attitude, statement, or behavior will do damage to another person or persons – particularly if those persons are on the margins. It is incumbent upon us to declare that hate has no place in the discussion when an entire religion is relegated as terrorist, or an entire population or ethnicity is named as rapists and murderers. It is essential that we speak and act to keep our LGBTQIA+ siblings safe when they are attacked or when they can be fired or denied housing simply for who they are. It is our duty to say, “Black Lives Matter,” when we see evidence of systemic bias and injustice in our law enforcement and judicial systems. It is our responsibility to stand up and declare, “yes all women,” when we see the violence of misogyny and the devaluing of a person based of their gender.

Judge not, lest you be judged is a warning about hypocrisy – not a prevention from declaring what is good and what is bad. We can, and should, make judgements that declare this is not what God intends. This is not what abundant life looks like – this is not what it means to have love for one another. Be when we do this, we do it knowing that we must attend to ourselves first, and then to our communities as well. We do this humbly, knowing we may wrong and may need to be corrected ourselves. We do this being open to the movement of the Spirit. And we do this, not because we are called to judge – but rather, because we are called to love.

Amen.