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Do Not Judge

Matthew 7:1-6

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Today I am returning to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount from Matthew. Although it has been over a month, I would remind us that in chapters 5 and 6, Jesus spoke about the nature of true blessedness and setting aside anger, contempt, lust, manipulation and paying people back or getting even. Jesus encouraged us to forsake trying to impress other people and building our life on material wealth. All this is important because it leads to what comes next in chapter 7 where Jesus illustrates how we are to see and treat especially those closest to us which includes not condemning, blaming, or judging those around us nor forcing wonderful things upon them. Jesus says,

*"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.*

*For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.*

*Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbors' eye.*

*Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you."*

Jesus is speaking about abandoning the deeply rooted human practice of judging, condemning, or blaming others. Being a follower of Christ involves becoming the kind of person who does not condemn or blame others. Can you imagine Jesus thought there might be a problem with some of his followers being overly critical and judgmental of others? Can you imagine people who are part of a church judging others in a way that is unfair or unjust, such as stating publicly that someone's illness was a result of his sin? That couldn't happen could it? Have you ever made judgments about or assumptions about others that were not necessarily true because you didn't have all the facts?

Jesus is saying in these verses that we will never see others clearly, accurately, and honestly until we've clearly, accurately, honestly, and carefully at ourselves to make sure that our own vision is not distorted by our own biases, needs, opinions, and sin.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one of the world's most distinguished astronomers was certain there were canals on Mars. Sir Percival Lowell, esteemed for his study of the solar system, had a particular fascination with the Red Planet. When he heard, in

1877, that an Italian astronomer had seen straight lines crisscrossing the Martian surface, Lowell spent the rest of his years squinting into the eyepiece of his giant telescope in Arizona, mapping the channels and canals he saw. He was convinced the canals were proof of intelligent life on Mars, possibly an older and wiser race than humanity. Lowell's observations gained wide acceptance and his reputation was such that no one dare to contradict him.

Today, of course, things are different. Space probes have orbited Mars and even landed on its surface. The entire planet has been mapped, and no one has seen a canal. How could Lowell have seen so much that wasn't there? There are two possibilities. He wanted to see the canals so badly that he did, over and over again. Secondly, we know now that Lowell suffered from a rare eye disease that made him see the blood vessels in his own eyes. The Martian "canals" he saw were nothing more than the bulging veins of his own eyeballs. Today the malady is known as "Lowell's Syndrome."

When Jesus warns of seeing the speck in another's eye while missing the log in our own, could he not be referring to the spiritual equivalent of Lowell's syndrome? We think we are, of course, totally objective and unbiased and thus see the shortcomings of others crystal clearly. In truth what we're seeing is distorted by our own eye disease, by our own sin.

Jesus attacks the habit of constantly seeing fault with what others say and do. It is a disease of the spirit. The critic arrogantly assumes a superiority that entitles him or her to assess the failings of others. People with this disease are present in every church and in every organization populated by human beings. Some are merely infected, others are actually carriers. Dale Carnegie said, *"Any fool can criticize, condemn, and complain --and most do."*

Jesus declares that the higher righteousness of the kingdom of God means renouncing our tendency to judge others more harshly than we judge ourselves. In a wise and humble follower of Jesus, self-confrontation always precedes the confrontation of others. Jesus uses a familiar and funny image to make his point. *"Why do you see the **speck** in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice **the log** in your own eye?"* Can you imagine an eye doctor or an optometrist with a two by four through his eye trying to assist others in improving their vision? It would get pretty uncomfortable sitting in a chair with someone whacking you in the head with a board every time he tried to shine that little light in your eyes. Optometrists would be better off and better able to help others

with their specks, after they address their own situation. That is what Jesus is teaching. Get your own house in order before you try to get everyone else's cleaned up.

Often, however, this is not the human tendency. People often see even the minutest problems in others, sometimes things which aren't even *there* because we are responding to something which is inaccurate or untrue. Yet we can have difficulty noticing the beam sized faults in our own lives. It is easier to see the specks in our parents or children, friends or classmates, or other church members, than it is to see the logs in our own attitudes and thoughts. Familiarity unfortunately can breed contempt and we may treat strangers with more respect than people who are closest to us.

Frequently when we're sharing our beliefs and opinions we offer our critique of other people – who they are, what they think, what their weaknesses are - and all the while what we're really doing is revealing who *we* are, what *we* think, and what *our* weaknesses are. The sad thing is how much of our conversation is of this nature and how seldom we realize what we're doing. One man (Sydney Harris) said, *"When I complain, I do it because, 'It's good to get things off my chest,' when you complain, I remind you that griping doesn't help anybody."*

Condemnation especially when accompanied by anger, contempt, and self-righteousness, blinds us to the reality of the other person. Our motive when we see the speck in our neighbor's eye may be good or bad. There are times when we all may need the help of another person to get something out of our eye. Make no mistake either, specks can be very irritating. If you've ever tried to read or drive a car with a speck of dirt in your eye you know the problems a speck can cause. The deeper issue Jesus is illustrating is the moral superiority that leads us to condemning others in the first place. Moral superiority is found in people without the ability to be actively self-critical. Being actively self-critical or reflective means we are aware of the strengths and working on the weaknesses in our own character. Self-criticism always precedes the criticism of others.

An old story of the Desert Fathers tells of a man who is asked to come and to judge a guilty brother. He protested but was compelled to make the journey. Before leaving he filled a large bag with sand and then made a very small hole in the bottom of it and put it on a basket on his back. When he reached the city the brothers greeted him and asked what he was doing. *"My sins run out behind me in a long line and I do not see them yet you have asked me to come and judge the sins of another."* The monks forgave their brother and released him immediately.

Will Rogers put it this way, *“There is nothing as easy as denouncing. It doesn’t take much to see something is wrong, but it does take some eyesight to see what will put it right again.”* Looking at the needs or weaknesses of others can be a religiously and socially approved way of never looking at oneself. Taking the log out of your own eye requires healthy self-evaluation. When you get something in your eye, you go to a mirror and to look for and remove the eyelash or whatever is obstructing your vision and causing you pain. Likewise, we need to take a close look at ourselves in order to remove the impediments that prevent us from seeing ourselves and others as Jesus does. **In healthy self-evaluation we look backward to learn and look forward with hope.** It isn’t healthy to wallow in the mistakes of our past; that can lead to depression and cynicism. We are to learn from the past, not to live in it. What we said to someone 5 years ago isn’t the issue as much as – are we still saying the same kind of judgmental or hurtful words today. We can’t control what we said yesterday, but we do control what we say today. We are not to allow healthy self-evaluation to become morbid preoccupation with self. The Apostle Paul had in his past approved the murder of Christians. He knew we can’t change our past, but we can learn from it; asking forgiveness where necessary and giving it when we need to. Looking forward with hope we know that whatever happened in the past, with God’s help the future can be different.

**In healthy self-evaluation we seek a place in God’s scheme rather than scheming to find a place.** It can be painful to realize we may never achieve a dream for which we have longed. We may compare how we are doing with others against whom we seem to fall short or surpass. Paul recommends in **2 Corinthians 10:12-13**: *“We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves. But **when they measure themselves by one another, and compare themselves with one another, they do not show good sense.** We, however, will not boast beyond limits, but will keep within the field that God has assigned to us, to reach out even as far as you.”*

The greatest opponent any of us are likely to face may just be our self, and not another person.

**In healthy self-evaluation we make sure we measure the right things.** Measuring Einstein’s height, Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s running speed, or Mother Teresa’s physical strength would have misjudged the value of them all. In the end, only one measurement is significant – our performance in the sight of God. Having accepted the mercy of God and claimed the name of Christ, how then do we live? Emily

Dickinson the great American poet wrote, *“Not what we did shall be the test...But what the Lord infers we would/ Had we divine been.”* Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 13:5-6, *“Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. TEST YOURSELVES.”* An unwillingness to reflect on, test and measure ourselves makes personal and spiritual growth almost impossible.

The last verse in Matthew 7:1-6 is, *“Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.”* By this Jesus means dogs can't eat a Bible nor can a pig digest pearls, they aren't helpful for them so we shouldn't force them upon them. In the same way, in our efforts to correct or control other people we may tell them things that are valuable to us even if they can't take them in. This happens when we judge and assume and talk, rather than seeking to ask, listen, and understand.

Jesus teaches us to look at others to understand and to help them, rather than to judge. A man wrote about an experience he had one Sunday morning on a subway in New York. “People were sitting quietly – some reading newspapers, some lost in thought, some resting with their eyes closed. It was a calm, peaceful scene. Then suddenly, a man and his children entered the subway car. The children were so loud and rambunctious that instantly the whole climate changed.

The man sat down next to me and closed his eyes, apparently oblivious to the situation. The children were yelling back and forth, throwing things, even grabbing people's papers. It was very disturbing. And yet, the man next to me did nothing. It was difficult not to feel irritated. I could not believe that he could be so insensitive as to let his children run wild like that and do nothing about, taking no responsibility at all. It was easy to see that everyone else felt irritated too. So finally, with what I felt was unusual patience and restraint, I turned to him and said, *“Sir, your children are really disturbing a lot of people. I wonder if you couldn't control them a little more?”*

The man lifted his gaze as if to come to a consciousness of the situation for the first time and said softly, *“Oh, you're right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don't know what to think, and I guess they don't know how to handle it either.”*

Can you imagine what I felt at that moment? Suddenly I SAW things differently, and because I SAW differently, I THOUGHT differently, I FELT differently, I BEHAVED differently. My irritation vanished. I didn't have to worry about controlling my attitude or my behavior; my heart was filled with the man's pain. Feelings of sympathy and

compassion flowed freely. *“Your wife just died? Oh, I’m so sorry! Can you tell me about it? What can I do to help?”* Everything changed in an instant.”<sup>1</sup>

In order to see differently, we need to be differently. Rather than looking with an eye of judgment, we may look with a desire to understand. In the eyes of God, failure can be remedied. Sin which is confessed and turned away from can be forgiven – including arrogance, judging others, and condemnation. As followers of Jesus we spend time scrutinizing ourselves and looking forward with hope; we seek a place in God’s scheme rather than scheming to find a place; we are more concerned about how we’re living in the sight of God so the Lord can help us remove the log in our own eye.

As we are growing and learning then we may, in a spirit of genuine humble concern, begin to understand others and to assist them with their specks. What are you in the habit of looking at? This weekend we celebrate the life of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King JR. who said, *“I have a dream that one day my children will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”*

That is a dream worth striving for.

Remember, when it comes to judgment, Jesus says the measure you give will be the measure you receive. Err on the side of grace.

#### Additional Scriptures on Judging

##### **Romans 14:10-13:**

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

For it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.”

So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.

##### **James 4:11-12**

*“Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against one another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.*

***There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy.***

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, pages 30-31.

***So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?"***

Romans 2:1-7, 16

**2 Corinthians 13:5-6:**

Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves.

Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless, indeed, you fail to meet the test.

I hope you will find out that we have not failed.