

Sermon on the Mount

Message 11

The Sin of Judging

Matthew 7:1-23

America's Greatest Virtue

Two weeks ago we suggested that the greatest sin in America is insincerity. You can commit any number of serious sins and people will accept you, but try to cover up your misdeeds and you will quickly lose support. People of all sorts may deeply oppose the beliefs of the late Pope John Paul II, but they still respect him as a man. But Cardinal Law of Boston has been urged to resign because of the perception that he is covering up his failures.

If insincerity is the great American sin, what is the great American virtue? Why, tolerance, of course. We are proud of our tolerance for people of all races, religions, sexes, and tastes. We tolerate rock music and classical music. We tolerate people who are born black, white, and yellow, and those who make themselves green, purple, and orange. We tolerate men and women, sex before, during, and after marriage, and sex with anything that makes you feel good. We tolerate Christians, Muslims, Hindus, witches, and atheists. The only thing we do not tolerate is intolerant people – you know, those obnoxious persons like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, who believe that others are wrong and that people who do not believe in Christ will go to hell. Most Christians, the good guys, have a more mature attitude. They truly follow Jesus, especially His command not to judge. So in the church many theological views and many worship styles will be tolerated – as long as you do not judge some to be wrong. The important thing is that we all love Jesus and get along happily together. And tonight's passage is about just that – how to get along happily together, starting with Jesus' command not to judge.

But before we tackle this passage, let us review where we are in the Sermon on the Mount. This message of Jesus' is His vision for the Kingdom He came to earth to establish. He is painting a comprehensive picture, delivering a grand vision of the sort of people His followers will be. He began in chapter five teaching on the character of those in His Kingdom – the beatitudes. Then He moved into teaching true obedience to God's laws – obedience from the heart, not merely on the surface. In chapter six He showed what true piety is – sincerity in prayer, fasting, and good deeds. Last week we studied His teaching on Kingdom values – and saw that those who truly follow Jesus will pursue His Kingdom before any personal goals. Now as we enter chapter seven Jesus teaches the nature of relationships in His Kingdom, how to enter His Kingdom, and the danger of failing to get in. Let us proceed by reading chapter seven, verses one to twelve.

Judge Not

After John 3:16, Matthew 7:1 is perhaps the most quoted verse in the Bible. There is something appealing, something comforting about this verse, "Judge not, that you be not judged." And it is usually quoted to support the belief that it is wrong to criticize the beliefs or behaviors of others. The problem is, try as we might, we cannot help judging people. We are moral creatures and we live in a moral universe. Some may think one thing is right and others may think it is wrong, but we cannot help judging the morality of each other. Even those who try hard to accept everyone equally end up judging those who are less "tolerant" than they. American society is devoted to tolerance, but it is an elusive goal. All sorts of sins are tolerated, but just try to smoke in a restaurant or talk on your cell phone in public, and you will see just how critical our tolerant society can be. Furthermore, as you read through this passage you begin to realize that Jesus actually encourages judging! Look at verse six, for example. He clearly expects you to distinguish between holy and dogs, pearls and pigs – and you cannot possibly take them as morally equivalent. Later in the chapter He warns us about false prophets, obviously requiring that we identify such. So from everyday experience and from this chapter itself, we are forced to conclude that judging is an inescapable

fact of like. Why, then, does Jesus tell us not to judge?

This passage is fascinating, and its fascination is enhanced by its vivid images. Clearly Jesus thought this subject was of vital importance and He went out of His way to make it memorable. Taking the chapter as a whole, it seems that the opening verse is a rhetorical device. It is a startling statement designed to get our attention – and it succeeds brilliantly! I think it is very likely that verse one was a proverbial saying common in Jesus' day, and He used it as a foil for His teaching. Perhaps Jesus quoted the familiar saying to introduce His topic and then commented on it. In any case verse one resonates easily with us.

Why is that so? Why is it so appealing to forgo judgment? Well, it is certainly easier that way. It is more convenient to tolerate everything than to do the hard work of evaluating the pros and cons of the beliefs and behaviors you encounter. Especially if you seek to love other people. If you are trying to be meek, merciful, and a peacemaker, it is a lot easier if you do not have sharp disagreements with others. We know that in the past some people fought over such matters as baptism, eschatology, drinking, and dancing. Now we feel more enlightened because we do not fight over such matters. Surely we all agree it is wrong to fight with others, especially in the church – but peace achieved by ignorance is hardly a virtue.

Speaking of virtues, perhaps the premier virtue among Christians is niceness (which, by the way, is just our term for tolerance). We are slightly embarrassed by such heroes of the faith as Martin Luther who would die for (gasp!) theological convictions. John Knox reformed Scotland, but he insulted the queen by railing against her sin. We admire the courage and accomplishments of such men, but we are ashamed of their rudeness. Or what we think is rudeness. We wish these men had welcomed all opinions without prejudice and had been nice to everyone. We forget that they were fighting for their lives, literally, and fighting for the survival of the true gospel. Luther, Knox, and others like them had their flaws, but generally they loved other people. It is just that they did not see niceness in any list of Biblical virtues.

Frankly, when you examine the reasons for our hatred of judging, much of it boils down to a devil's bargain. Although verse two is seldom quoted, we instinctively recognize the truth in it. If you judge someone else, you expose yourself to judgment in the same degree. The way to protect yourself from the judgment of others is to refrain from judging yourself. So you strike the devil's bargain – you accept my sin, and I will accept yours. That way we can all be happy.

Mature Christianity requires judgment. If you will grow out of spiritual infancy you must learn to distinguish good and evil, right and wrong, true and false – and that is judging. The goal is not to cease judging, but to do it the right way. The central point in verses one to five is this: do not be hypocritical. Do not judge others without also judging yourself. But do not neglect to judge. Do judge. Start by judging yourself. Be critical of yourself. Compare your beliefs and actions with God's word and see if you are in line. Make the necessary adjustments. Get your life in order – or make progress on it. Then judge others. Compare their beliefs and behaviors to scripture – not to you, or to the culture of your church, but to the scripture. If you find someone dangerously out of line, go and help him. By now, if you have judged yourself first, you will be compassionate and patient with him. You will be a real help to him.

We tend to think love and judgment are mutually conflicting attitudes, but this is false. It is possible to be *both* loving and discerning. In fact, if we would follow Jesus fully, we *must* be both loving and discerning. The key is to be judicious, but not judgmental – to have a critical mind, but an accepting heart. Jesus did, and we can, too. This is the goal He sets before us, those who would be His followers.

Pearls and Pigs

Now comes the pop quiz. It is time to practice your skill in judging without hating. What does Jesus mean in verse six by the holy, the dogs, pearls and swine? Out of context this could mean anything, but this

verse is positioned right here in this passage on judging. If you judge someone to help him – figuratively to remove the speck from his eye – you give him advice. You teach him the scripture and encourage him to live by it. Isn't God's word holy? And in another place Jesus compared the gospel to a precious pearl. Now in Jesus' day dogs were not household pets. They were despised as dirty creatures. Pigs were unclean – ceremonially as well as hygienically. But even if they were not unclean, who in his right mind would give pearls to pigs? What would pigs do with pearls? It would be a complete waste. So we conclude that in this parable Jesus is saying do not give God's word to those who refuse to use it. We are not talking here about your ordinary unbeliever, but about those who are actively opposed to Christ's gospel. We are talking about people who by their fierce opposition to the gospel have made themselves dangerous enemies of the church. Jesus is saying, do not antagonize them any further. Leave them alone. They had a chance. They heard the gospel. They will still be saved if they turn to Christ. But while they are hell-bent against Christ, you cannot do any good by getting in their way.

When I was a boy we learned of a neighbor who was repairing his barn roof. He had placed the ladder in the barnyard and was on it fixing the leak. Sometime that afternoon his pigs rooted around the ladder and made it unstable. It fell over, the farmer fell to the ground, and the pigs ate him. Little was left of him when his family discovered the accident. The message here is judge people with righteous judgment. There are people who hate Christ and the gospel. Such people are vicious and will destroy you. This is Christ speaking here. This is not impetuous Peter, who might impatiently blurt out whatever comes to mind. These are not the words of James and John, who wanted to destroy the Samaritan village which would not accept them (Luke 9:51-56). No, it is true. Jesus says there are people who are so evil they are dangerous. Identify them and avoid them.

OK, you are convinced. You need to judge people according to Christ's standard. But it is not easy. How can you do this right? Specifically, how can you be sure you know who are pigs and who are not? The simple answer is to ask. Verses 7 to 11 are generally used to show that God answers prayer, but that is not their primary meaning. God does hear and answer our prayers, of course, but these verses are specifically addressing the problem of judging dogs and pigs. Ask God. Pray for insight. If you ask God for insight into people, He will not deny you. It may take a while. You may need to persist a bit. But eventually God will answer you. How could you think otherwise? Even earthly fathers give their children what they need. Certainly your heavenly father will give you what you need.

One last thing. As you judge others, remember this. Treat others the way you want to be treated. Do you want people to jump to conclusions about you? Do you want them to speak roughly to you? Do you want them to be impatient with you? Do you want others to let you persist in sin? Then do not treat them that way. If you want others to be understanding and patient, you be understanding and patient with them. If you want others to get the full picture about you, then you take the time to get the full picture about them. Do you really want help in your spiritual life? Then you seek to be a real help to others. As you judge others, treat them the way you want to be treated.

When to Judge

Having finished teaching us how to judge people, Jesus now turns to some specific instances where judging is an absolute necessity. In the following verses He warns us to beware of false prophets and false believers. Let us proceed by reading verses 15 to 23.

A prophet speaks for God. A false prophet *claims* to speak for God, but does not. He is lying. Obviously this is a very critical matter. If you are following someone who claims to be teaching you God's way, but is not, you will go badly astray. Thinking you are doing God's will, you will in fact end up opposing God. It is essential that you avoid false prophets. But how? How can you tell which ones are false? Some, of course are easy to spot. Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Christian Scientists are among those

groups which claim to be Christian, but deny the most basic elements of our faith. These false prophets can be identified by their heresies. The more difficult ones to identify are those who profess sound doctrine. In both Jesus' day and ours there are those who look like real Christians, but are not. How can we tell the difference? By their fruit. Look at their lives. What is the result of their teaching? Are they and their followers growing more like Christ? Are they characterized by love for others, or do they use and control others? Do they give themselves to others, or are they getting rich by their ministry? Do they exhibit the holiness required by God, or do they indulge sin?

Every generation has its share of false prophets – people who claim to teach the Bible and speak for God, but in fact are in ministry for personal gain. Today we are faced with various groups claiming to follow Christ, but are really racists. The white supremacists come to mind first, but they are not alone. A colleague was telling me recently of a Korean minister who was teaching people to seek spiritual guidance from Koreans rather than Caucasians. I love the Korean Christians I know, and I know this is a very rare situation among Koreans, but I suppose every race has people who use Christ as a cover for racism. Whoever tries to promote Christianity as a religion for white people, or any other race, is a false prophet.

Some preachers embrace a religion of progress through human effort. They seek to establish the Kingdom of God through political activity. This social gospel is a false religion and will lead you away from Christ. A version of this took off in the sixties – Liberation Theology. This taught that Jesus' Kingdom would be established through Marxist revolution, and was particularly popular in poor areas of South America. Closer to home, in the 80's an extreme form of charismatic Christianity emerged, sometimes called the "Toronto Blessing" for the place of its origin. It involved bizarre behavior – animal noises and wild meetings. Such is false Christianity. Lately a group called the International Church of Christ has been spreading around the world. Several other RUF campus ministers know students who have encountered these people. This group is noted for its cult-like control of the lives of its members. Like all such groups, the leaders live questionable lives while they demand rigorous obedience from the people. Then there are other groups who claim to be Christian, yet approve homosexuality and other perversions. Such people are wolves, not shepherds.

If this sounds harsh, remember that Jesus chose to call false prophets wolves. They are evil, dangerous, and will destroy God's people if they get the chance. In Galatians 1:6-10 we read,

I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed. For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.

Such words are too strong for me, but if I am to be a true prophet, I must tell you what God has said. False teachers must be opposed, because if they are allowed to teach unhindered, they will destroy God's people. They are wolves, and wolves eat sheep. Jesus' message regarding them is to beware. Judge your teachers. Compare their teaching to scripture. Examine their fruit. Flee those who are false, lest you be destroyed. If you are involved in a church which fails to uphold the basic truths of scripture, or exerts a controlling influence over its members – get out and join another church.

Conclusion

Christianity which refuses to judge people is childish and uncaring. Christianity which condemns people is juvenile and uncaring. Mature Christians judge people with a loving heart. First of all they judge

themselves. They rigorously compare their beliefs and behavior to Biblical standards and make the necessary adjustments. They are always harder on themselves than on others. Mature Christians proceed to judge those around them, too – but never with a harsh or critical spirit. They know we are all weak human beings, and they have compassion on others. They love their friends so much they do not allow them to continue in beliefs or behaviors which are harmful and unbiblical, but they seek to help them live more Biblically. Mature Christians treat others the way they want to be treated – they love enough to get involved.

But Jesus warns us that there are those people whom we cannot help – people who are, at least for now, so hardened to the gospel and hateful of God that they frankly are dangerous. As pigs eat any animal within reach and wolves eat sheep, these people will destroy you if you get tangled up with them. Jesus tells us to flee them.

Which do you want? Do you want to remain an immature Christian, or do you want to grow up? Are you afraid that this task is too much for you? Do you think that if you try to judge, you will be harsh about it? Are you afraid you will misjudge people? Jesus promises to help. He says, “Ask”. *Ask* for insight, *ask* for compassion, *ask* for *sound* judgement. This is a prayer He will not refuse. With that promise – decide today to give up childish ways and learn to judge others righteously.

C. David Green
Lehigh University
November 28, 2006