

On Judging

Critical Words of Jesus:

Matthew 7:1-6

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Bethany Church

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When I was young, the most common English Bible was the King James Version. I read the Bible in King James English; I memorized it in King James English; and most adults around me prayed in King James English. They would pray, “O Lord, thou art holy,” and use words like *thee, thou, ye, thy, thine, hast* and *art*. One verse I committed to memory from the King James and still hear everywhere is Matthew 7:1, “***Judge not, that ye be not judged.***” Have you heard that? When I take a moral stand, I’ll hear, “Judge not that ye be not judged.” Or I might hear, “You’re judging; you’re judgmental” – like I just committed sin.

Imagine that someone in an AA group admits, “I sneak a drink or two every night.” A group member responds, “That’ll kill you.” The drinker responds, “You’re judgmental!” Imagine a child responding to the correction of his parent who warns, “You can’t continue hitting your sister.” “Judge not, that ye be not judged!” the kid spouts.

Jesus said a lot more than “judge not that ye be not judged.” To understand and experience the grace and health of these words, we need to hear more.

Jesus’ warning about judging was not to *insulate us from negative feedback*. Listen to what Paul writes to his friend Timothy (and by extension to Christian leaders).

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word... correct, rebuke and encourage-with great patience and

careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. (2 Timothy 4:1-4, NIV)

Since Christ Jesus will judge the living and the dead, Timothy is not to judge himself, but to serve as God's witness. He is to preach God's Word. He is to correct, rebuke and encourage. That is feedback, positive and **negative**! Paul tells Timothy that people will try to insulate themselves from that feedback. They'll gather around themselves teachers who will articulately say what they want to hear. Timothy is not to succumb to that. He is God's witness. He is not God's judge; no he speaks as God's witness. That is exactly what Jesus did.

Jesus states in John 3:17 that he didn't come to judge, yet he warned people of God's judgment. He confronted his followers with their lack of faith, and the religious leaders with their hypocrisy. Jesus was giving witness, not judging. Jesus said:

The world... hates me because I testify that what it does is evil. (John 7:7, NIV)

Jesus was hated because he *testified*. He gave witness. Jesus was God's witness. The point is that the command not to judge is not a command to accept, approve or be silent about all behavior. Indeed, through the power and counsel of the Holy Spirit, we become God's witnesses on earth until Jesus returns and judges all things.

Jesus' warning about judging was not *a call to gullibility or to abandon all judgment*. Indeed, in John 7 Jesus told a crowd that they were exercising poor judgment or discernment:

Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.
(John 7:24, NASU)

Paul writes that there is a discernment we are to exercise through the Holy Spirit:

The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment. (1 Corinthians 2:15, NIV)

In other words, the call to not judge is not a call to be stupid and undiscerning. We are to receive understanding through the voice of the Holy Spirit, which includes the Bible that is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness.

I've noticed that judgment in the Bible often focuses on how people respond to the visitation of God and what they do with the word God gives them through witnesses. The call not to judge, then, is not a call to abandon discernment especially when God sends witnesses.

Additionally, the call not to judge does not *relieve us of our responsibilities* that require judging. Parents must exercise judgment, including discipline with their children. Bosses must do so with their employees, pastors with their congregations, and authorities with their people. The Bible teaches that we do this for the blessing and protection of people on behalf of God, and that we are accountable to God.

If Jesus' command not to judge does not insulate us from positive and negative feedback, if it does not release us from the responsibility to judge behavior, and if it does not remove our responsibility to exercise judgment in certain spheres, what does it do? How does it apply? What is its purpose?

First, the command not to judge *reminds* you and me *of our true nature and stature*. We are not to judge because it will result in our judgment. In other words, God is our judge; and we are not to supplant him. Paul writes:

You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat... Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another... Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. (Romans 14:10, 13, 19, NIV)

Paul tells us that our focus is on building people, not tearing them down. We are to bless our brother, not blast him. We are not judges; we are servants of God's redeeming work. If we, then by nature, are not judges, we give feedback as witnesses from God, we judge the nature of

things depending upon God and we exercise judgment where we are responsible on behalf of God. Jesus' command reminds us what we are, what we are not, and for whom we live.

Second, the command not to judge warns about *our criteria in judgment*. Jesus said:

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.
(Matthew 7:1-2, NIV)

The term *measure* is actually the Greek word *meter*. The meter you use will be used with you.

If you are harsh, it will be harsh with you. If you are exacting, it will be exacting with you. If you are patient, you will be shown patience. Jesus enlarges on this in Luke 6:

Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.
(Luke 6:37-38, NIV)

Do you get the picture? If we judge, we'll be judged. If we condemn, we'll be condemned. If we forgive, we'll be forgiven; and if we give, we will receive with the same measure. God is just. In fact, Jesus goes on to compare our judgment as the blind leading the blind. He says it is good enough if we become like our teacher. You know who our teacher is? Our teacher came not to judge. He came to save. Is our focus the same? Jesus warns us about our focus and criteria.

Third, Jesus shows us the path to building one another. He says:

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Matthew 7:3-5, NIV)

Often times our attempt to help someone else does more harm than good because we don't see clearly. The eye is one of the most fragile and vulnerable parts of the body. If we are

impaired in what we see, what does that mean when it is so important to see in helping someone with what is fragile and vulnerable? We can help others, if we'll let them help us. If we get help, we can help.

When someone acts up, it is good to ask if I somehow have provoked it. It is good to check for the beam in my eye and ask for help. In that atmosphere, mutual edification occurs because pride gets eliminated. If you have an issue with someone, it helps to know if and how you contribute. Remember that you are not the judge, and the measure you use is used with you. If it is humility, it will be humility. If it is blessing, it will be blessing.

This summer a bear in northern Minnesota got its head stuck in a pail. Residents wisely avoided trying to help the bear themselves and called the DNR officer. Jesus warned us about giving feedback to those who by nature will turn on us and trample us. The DNR officer was worried about that himself. He spent most of a day figuring out how to help the bear. He finally accomplished and made news with his ingenuity. I don't remember how he got that bear wrapped tightly with a rope around a telephone pole, how he got the pail off and how he got the rope off and stayed safe. (If I see a bear with pail stuck over its head, I'll call the DNR.) I do know that the point of the officer was the freedom of the bear; and I do know that if we react to people without their interest in mind, even when it's being shorted change at a store or returning a damaged product, we miss the greater point. As to the nature of the bear, it is better to leave the bears, dogs and pigs to those charged with tending them.

Sometimes, we can't. Jesus couldn't. He spoke with great care and told only parables to those who were ready to devour him. At the end of his life, he spoke plainly to them.

Remember that we are witnesses for the creator and judge of all. Our call is to care, rather than judge. Let's then care as he guides us with good judgment.