

Pastor's Message – 3/14/21  
Sermon on the Mount: Judge Not  
Matthew 7:1-5

Has this every happened to you? It's happened to me. Perhaps a child in your care was screaming and carrying on and throwing a tantrum. Perhaps you've witnessed that situation in public of someone's else's child misbehaving: at the grocery or the restaurant or some other place? What did you do? What did you think?

Steven Covey, in his book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, told of riding on a New York subway one Sunday morning. People were sitting quietly until a man and his children entered the subway car. The man sat next to Covey while the children ran wild through the car, yelling, throwing things and just plain misbehaving. Meanwhile the dad sat there next to Covey and did nothing. Dirty looks were thrown his way, judgments were made about the man's neglectful parenting, as he sat there in a trance, completely ignoring his children's misbehavior.

Finally, Covey broke the man's trance with an appeal that he get control of his children. The dad responded with these unexpected words, "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." Covey talks about how, in an instant, his attitude toward the dad was changed. He moved from judging criticism to compassion as he saw things as they really were.

When Jesus says, "Judge not, that you be not judged," He is not suggesting that we set aside our ability to look at things critically or to discern the difference between what is good and what is evil. He isn't suggesting that we should never try to help a friend or a brother or sister in the church by a gentle word of correction. God has blessed us with a critical apparatus that helps us navigate through life. Christians are discerning. We "test the spirits" (1 John 4:1) as we follow Christ. We confront evil when we see it. We speak up for the good.

Jesus' command not to judge others is rather a warning against a prideful critical spirit which is quick to make conclusions about the character or behavior of others. It's Covey on the bus, writing the story in his head about the dad's neglectful parenting. What's more, Jesus is confronting hypocritical judgment which sees only the sins of others and not one's own sins.

This explains Jesus' humorous hyperbole of trying to remove a speck in another's eye while we have a two-by-four in our own. The picture shows us how ludicrous it is for us judge others without having judged ourselves. If we are to point out a friend's sins, we do so from a clear vision of our own sins. We come at moral criticism humbly as a fellow sinner, not as a righteous judge. God is the only truly righteous judge. God alone judges from a posture of perfection.

Clearly, the target here is the Pharisees who delighted in finger-pointing. Jesus unveils their hypocrisy as they play God and mercilessly judge the behavior of others. Over time these guardians of community morality had "assumed the bench." Jesus

shows that they have been disqualified from the bench by their own hypocrisy. He warns that they will be the victims of the same kind of merciless judgment from God.

It was Jesus who once stepped into a scene of Pharisees ready to stone a woman caught in adultery. They tested Jesus, asking if the law of Moses was right in saying that such a woman should be stoned. Jesus wrote on the ground with his finger and then said, "Let him who is without sin among you cast the first stone at her" (John 8:7). They walked away, one by one.

Jesus spent much of his ministry under the watchful, plank-in-the-eye Pharisees. They called him a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of sinners (Luke 7:34). They said he was in league with the devil: "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons" (Mt 12:24). Ultimately, they pointed at Jesus and charged him with blasphemy.

In his trial before the Sanhedrin, he was asked if he was the Messiah. He answered, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:62). The high priest tore his robe and said, "What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?" (Mark 14:63-64). And they condemned him to death. The Pharisees had written their own story of Jesus. Their prejudice and injustice were driven by self-righteousness, jealousy and fear. They could not see clearly with such huge planks in their eyes.

Jesus knew that his own followers would not be immune from self-righteous judgment. Today one can hear a pastor describe a hypercritical congregant as an "alligator." Books are written on how to handle antagonists in the church. It is said that "the church shoots its own wounded." Christians are shocked when they hear that one of our own "could do something like that!" We judge certain sins harshly and completely ignore others. We may look across a gathering of God's people and begin writing our own stories of where this person falls short and how that person has failed. All along, as we judge others, we can fail to see the planks in our own eyes.

The great irony of the cross comes as the perfect Judge, the one "who will come again to judge the living and the dead," is falsely accused, convicted and executed. The Judge of all is judged unjustly. In that judgment gone wrong, God amazingly works a unique kind of justice. God counts the execution of Jesus as ours. God judges Jesus as if Jesus were you and I. God points the accusing finger at Jesus. God puts grace in play and rewrites the story. This is much more than the story of an innocent victim of injustice. This is God sending Jesus to suffer and die as a consequence of our sins. Among those sins are every hasty judgment we've made of another's character, every hurtful word of criticism, every attitude warped by prejudice or fear.

The next time we are ready to write the story of another's failure or another's sin, we must remember what happened at the cross. We will see the plank in our own eye. We will see our sin. And we will see the planks of the cross and the one who died for us there. Then, as it always is with God, judgment will be tempered with grace. Amen.